



Published May 22nd, 2024

Central San appeals to customers to speak out on large fee hikes

By Sora O'Doherty

The Central Contra Costa Sanitary District wants their customers to communicate with the Regional Water Quality Board, who is proposing nutrient regulations that will result in very large wastewater fee hikes for customers if approved. All three Lamorinda mayors have already written to the board expressing their concerns.

Nutrients in wastewater are a serious environmental problem. According to Emily Barnett, Communications and Government Relations Manager at Central Contra Costa Sanitary District, in the past couple of years there have been at least two significant fish kills in the San Francisco Bay owing to the presence of algae blooms caused by nitrogen from a number of sources, including wastewater.

Central San is committed to nutrient reduction but believes that the Regional Board should help plan multi-benefit recycled water projects due to the large \$665 million price tag, which will be borne by homeowners, businesses, and renters. This reporter met with Barnett and engineers Danae Gemmell and Melody LaBella who answered questions.

Their biggest concern is that the Regional Board's proposed permit will translate to about a 28% increase in rates over the next seven to ten years, just to deal with the nutrient issue alone. On July 1 this year Central San's annual rates, which are included in property tax bills, will rise to \$725 for single family homes, \$343 for accessory dwelling units, and \$647 for apartments, condominiums, duplexes, and mobile homes. That increase, approved last year, will not cover the costs of reducing nutrients in wastewater.

In her letter, Orinda Mayor Darlene Gee said, "To meet the Water Board's proposed steep nutrient reduction requirements and short timeline, the Bay Area's clean water agencies will need to spend more than \$11 billion-costs that ultimately will be borne by our constituents. Under the proposed order, Orinda residents alone could be on the hook for nearly \$21 million in costs to fund required treatment upgrades. . . ." She added that this "would be a significant financial burden for many vulnerable members of our community and working families already struggling to make ends meet."

Central San urges residents of Contra Costa County to ask the Regional Board to grant a 90-day extension to the comment period to allow the public adequate time to provide input on this important and financially impactful decision. There will be a public hearing on June 12 where people can join remotely to provide comments. The public comment period closed on May 8, but Central San would like to see it reopened and extended.

Central San also urges residents to ask the Regional Board to conduct a hearing of community concerns before considering adoption of the order, allow time for the necessary scientific research to better understand nutrient reductions that will benefit the Bay, and develop a financial analysis to determine how the proposed order will impact Bay Area residents, as well as how we can mitigate this significant burden-which comes on top of numerous other essential infrastructure needs-for our communities.

Central San says that they are doing what they can to keep down costs that must be passed through to rate-payers. To address nutrients they are looking at low interest 30-year loans to spread the costs over a longer time than the 10-year period the regional board is proposing for implementation of the nutrient permit. The short time frame creates other problems as well, according to Barnett, such as creating competition with other agencies for contractors and materials, personnel, and so on to complete the nutrient reduction project.

Barnett also confirmed that this project is an unfunded mandate, meaning that while the State requires the actions be taken, no funding is provided to the agencies who must comply, unlike the Clean Water Act, which did include funding for construction costs.

Barnett is also concerned that the requirements apply to all areas of the Bay Area equally, even though the water quality issues are not the same in all areas. For example, Central San contributes less than 1% of the time to the Suisun Bay resulting in dissolved oxygen below 4 milligrams per liter, which is the indicator threshold for sustaining fish populations. Other areas of the Bay are as high as 92% contributors. Even if Central San spends \$665 million on nutrient reduction, they will still be at less than a 1% providing little to value to the Bay health while costing substantial rate payer dollars without a multi-benefit effect, such as augmenting regional water supply.

Additionally, Barnett expressed the wish that the Regional Board would take the lead on implementing a regional recycled water project that would not only reduce nutrients in the wastewater, but also add to Bay Area water resiliency.

More information about this subject can be located at www.centernalsan.org/nutrients

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