



THE MORRO BAY-CAYUCOS WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT UPGRADE

(And What It Means For You)

The City of Morro Bay has committed to upgrading our wastewater treatment plant over the next eight years. The upgrade will address environmental issues, improve plant efficiency and maximize its useful life. The project is complex and will cost an estimated \$25 million, most of which will be covered by increased sewer fees. The City recognizes the many challenges posed by the upgrade and wants to keep you informed about it and involved in the process. This Q&A sheet is offered to help inform residents and businesses about our plans, and to invite your participation in the process.

What's all the talk about an upgrade?

The two governing bodies voluntarily chose to upgrade the plant.

In June 2005 the Morro Bay City Council and the Cayucos Sanitary District Board of Directors voluntarily committed to upgrading our shared wastewater treatment plant. The plant was last upgraded in 1984 and as it ages, major treatment components must be replaced. The upgrade project will extend the plant's useful life and accommodate future community needs. The schedule for the upgrade is in a draft agreement with the Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB), the government agency that oversees water quality issues. The current 8-year schedule for completion of the upgrades is March 2014. When the upgrade is finished, the plant will be at a minimum of 100% secondary treatment standards.

How much will the project cost?

The upgrade is projected to cost approximately \$25 million. The bulk of the project cost will be paid by user fees.

The plant upgrade will take nearly eight years to complete and is the largest capital expense project in the history of both Morro Bay and Cayucos. We are aggressively pursuing grant fund opportunities to help share the costs of the project, but to date we have not identified any funds. We anticipate project costs will be covered through significant sewer rate increases. We recognize the difficulty this creates and are continuing to pursue other funding to help defray project costs to our customers. The exact cost and timing of rate increases will not be known until the treatment alternative is selected, facility plans are completed, and a final schedule is adopted.

What happens if the upgrade is not completed on time?

Fines will be charged and sewer rates will rise even more.

As we have seen in other communities, the RWQCB can levy **substantial financial penalties** for the City's failure to meet key milestones identified in the upgrade schedule and/or reach full secondary treatment standards by **March 2014**.

We must keep to our proposed schedule. Delays in the upgrade process could lead to additional sewer rate increases as costs increase over time. Attempts to shorten the time line could also create problems due to higher initial costs and increased fines if the reduced timelines cannot be met.

How can I get involved?

Attend public meetings and share your thoughts.

Informed public input is essential to this project. There will be numerous opportunities for public input and participation during the upgrade process. These will include discussions at public meetings including regularly scheduled JPA, City Council, and Sanitary District meetings. We encourage you to participate in these meetings and offer your input to elected officials and City and District staff. Updates on the upgrade process will be regularly posted on the City's website at: <http://www.morro-bay.ca.us/>.

Is the plant killing sea otters?

No.

The plant does not discharge "raw" sewage into the ocean. The plant's extensive monitoring efforts, overseen by State and Federal regulatory agencies, demonstrate that plant discharge is not contributing to otter mortality.

What about otters and *Toxoplasma gondii*?

No scientific evidence links the parasite suspected of causing otter deaths to the treatment plant.

While otter health and the number of otter strandings in the Estero Bay region have drawn a lot of media attention, the plant has not been found to be a source of the parasite, *T. gondii*.

T. gondii is a single-celled parasite linked to many otter strandings along the coast. It is known to originate in domestic cats and other felines, who spread it through their feces. It appears to enter the ocean primarily through rain runoff. The parasite is washed downstream from places where cat feces have been deposited, such as backyards and nearby fields. Eventually, this water, now carrying the *T. gondii*, enters the ocean. But how does it get into the otters?

Scientists have theorized that otters become infected by *T. gondii* in one of two ways: ingestion of water itself, or by eating shellfish that may accumulate *T. gondii* in their tissues before being eaten by the otters.

To address the possibility that cat litter being flushed and making its way through the plant could be introducing the parasite in water near the plant's discharge, mussels were hung from the buoys marking the plant's outfall location in 2003-2004. The test results found that these mussels did not contain *T. gondii*. The plant remains committed to working with the scientific experts on this important program.

How does the plant work, anyway?

Wastewater is screened, filtered and disinfected.

The plant is designed to treat up to 2 Million Gallons per Day (MGD) and flows averaged 1.25 MGD in 2005. The plant processes all wastewater by screening, grit removal, and sedimentation, which removes most of the solids (*primary* treatment). In addition, more than 1 MGD of the wastewater receives *secondary* treatment by processing through filters, a solids-contact chamber, and a secondary clarifier. All wastewater is then thoroughly disinfected and discharged into the Ocean. The outfall is located almost 2 miles north of the harbor entrance and terminates in a multi-port diffuser situated over a half mile from shore in 50 feet of water. Solids that are removed during the treatment process are composted for use as soil amendment.

How Do We Know the Discharge is Safe?

We've been conducting an intensive monitoring and reporting program for over 20 years and know what is in the discharge.

The plant operates in full compliance with the Clean Water Act. Our operating permit requires extensive monitoring to ensure strict compliance with regulatory standards to protect both public health and the marine environment.



We test for 167 chemical constituents in the effluent. During more than two decades of operation, samples have been routinely collected in the treated wastewater, in the sediments surrounding the ocean outfall, in the receiving seawater, and along the Atascadero Beach shoreline. Test results consistently indicate that the effluent is not impacting marine organisms close to the diffuser, nor impairing recreational activities within Estero Bay.

What is the status of the discharge permit?

It needs to be re-issued in May 2006.

The permit is reissued every five years. Since 1984, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the RWQCB have found that our discharge meets Clean Water Act standards, and have reissued the permit three times. In July 2003, we again applied for EPA and RWQCB permit renewal. The RWQCB staff is recommending approval of the permit with a 9 1/2-year upgrade schedule, and the Board will act on that request at a hearing scheduled for May 11, 2006. The proposed permit application and EPA and RWQCB staff reports are available online at: <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralcoast/Board/Agendas/032406/Item9/Index.htm>. Subsequently, the California Coastal Commission will determine the permit's consistency with the California Coastal Act.

Are tours of the plant and more information available?

Yes. Contact us at 772-6272.

Tours are available at any time and are highly encouraged to learn about the plant and what happens to the materials you put down your drain. Individuals, schools, and group tours of all sizes can be accommodated. Plant staff requests that you call for an appointment. If you would like more important information about the plant or still have questions, please contact Bruce Keogh, Wastewater Division Manager, at 772-6272.