

State Panel OKs Guidelines to Clean Up Runoff Pollution

Attacking the state's most problematic water pollution problem, state regulators pushed ahead with a sweeping effort on December 14, to clean up the urban runoff that continues to taint California's coastline.

The State Water Resources Control Board voted unanimously to approve a 61-point regulatory plan to control runoff. "Polluted runoff is the major environmental pollution problem we're facing in this state," said Mary Nichols, the governor's secretary of resources. "This is definitely a step forward."

The ambitious blueprint requires strict monitoring of coastal water quality and calls on state and local government to aggressively clean up sources of polluted runoff, which can range from pesticides to metals flecked off auto brake pads to the mountains of muck produced at dairy farms.

Any headway will come at a price, by some estimates as high as \$14 billion over the next decade. That staggering bill would be footed by taxpayers as well as affected businesses—most notably the state's booming building industry—that have to alter their current practices. In addition, money earmarked for the cleanup is included in Proposition 13, an environmental initiative on next March's ballot.

Among the changes being studied are al-

tered development strategies to create catch basins for runoff, improvements to do a better job of scrubbing drainage from the state's network of highways and stricter rules for businesses such as restaurants and auto shops. Golf courses were not mentioned specifically but will probably fall under general requirements.

The statewide plan, mandated by the federal government, would set up a three-tier approach. Voluntary rules would first be developed. If the pollution problem didn't improve, regulations would be set in place. And if all else fails, authorities could take tough enforcement steps against the most notorious sources of pollution, fining and dragging a chronic polluter into court.

Next month, the plan will go to the California Coastal Commission, which is expected to approve it, and then to two federal agencies for final review. If the document isn't cemented soon, more than \$5 million in federal funds to jump-start the effort would be jeopardized, water board officials said.

Although cities across the nation are plagued by polluted runoff, Southern California remains the biggest battleground. The paved urban sprawl produces the perfect environment to flush rainwater down storm

drains and concrete flood channels to the sea.

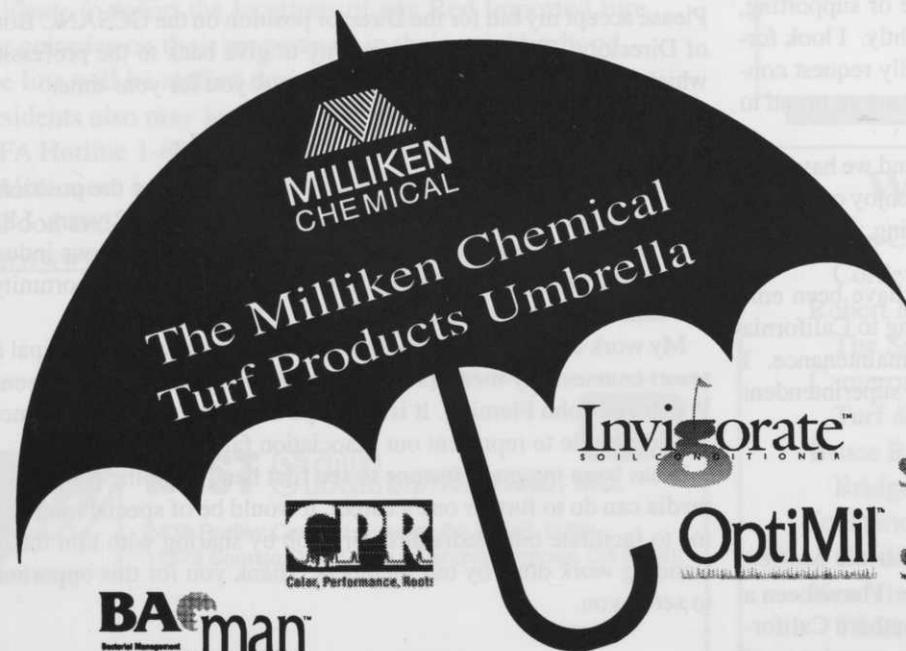
Even small rainstorms can pick up oil, grease discarded by restaurants, lawn fertilizers and other pollutants and carry them out to sea. The flow can continue in even the driest summer months, as runoff from irrigation keeps a trickle of tainted water headed to sea.

Although the federal Clean Water Act mandated controls on urban runoff more than a dozen years ago, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has until recently focused most of its attention on water pollution from industries and sewage plants. Now the agency has made polluted runoff a top priority.

California has lagged behind for years, but its new plan is the most ambitious in the nation. Most coastal states only attempt to address polluted runoff generated near the shoreline. California's plan applies to any watershed that ultimately feeds the sea, in some cases stretching hundreds of miles inland.

The plan also calls for a concerted effort to educate the public and businesses on ways to stop polluted runoff at its source, whether it is not dumping oil in a storm drain or taking steps to avoid summertime over-watering.

"This plan alone is not going to fix our runoff problems," said Linda Sheehan of the Center for Marine Conservation. "They're only going to be solved over time." ↗



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