

County to Fight Water Cleanup Rules

Supervisors' vote against a costly plan for runoff is criticized by environmentalists.

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A divided Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has voted to continue fighting strict rules on cleaning up storm water runoff, opening a new chapter in the long-running legal battle over beach pollution.

The vote was met with dismay by environmentalists who have backed efforts by California's regional water boards to impose tough requirements on local governments to clean up storm water pollution, the primary cause of beach closures.

"It's an outrageous waste of scarce public dollars," said David Beckman, a senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, which had fought the county's suit against the state. "The county is effectively asking for permission to continue to deliver huge quantities of polluted water to local beaches."

The 3-2 vote in closed session Tuesday authorized county lawyers to appeal a judge's ruling in March that upheld the legality of the new rules. The county had argued that those rules did not adequately weigh economic impact, among other things.

The Los Angeles-area runoff plan requires government agencies and builders to clean up tainted water before it trickles into waterways and makes its way to the ocean. But the county, along with many cities and business groups, has fought the plan, arguing that the rules could prove unreasonably costly.

"We want to do everything we can to accomplish clean water as much as anyone," said Howard Gest, a private attorney representing the county. "But we want to make sure that the programs that are required of the county are cost-effective and proven."

Supervisors Don Knabe, Michael Antonovich and Yvonne Brathwaite Burke voted in favor of an appeal. Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Gloria Molina voted against an appeal.

The plan requires the county to conduct more rigorous inspections of construction sites and industrial facilities that are likely to produce polluted runoff when it rains. In addition, the new rules hold the county and cities that own and operate storm drains accountable for ensuring that runoff pollution is dramatically reduced.

Michael Lauffer, an attorney for the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, acknowledged the costs but said beachgoers deserved cleaner water. "It's going to be a long-term expensive problem to solve," he said. "That said, it's worth it. They are world-class beaches."