

City, county agree on plan to cut trash in L.A. River

Officials pledge to spend \$168 million to reduce debris in the channel by half

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Los Angeles county and city officials have agreed to spend \$168 million to reduce by half the amount of trash that collects in the Los Angeles River, retreating from a costly court battle with state pollution regulators.

And the city of Los Angeles decided to drop its lawsuit against state regulators over the overall plan to clean up polluted runoff that spills from sidewalks and streets into storm drains and then flows to beaches and coastal waters.

Environmentalists applauded the decisions, announced Wednesday, as a major step toward meeting the goals of the Clean Water Act to have rivers, beaches and seacoast waters free of pollution that endangers wildlife or poses a risk to human health.

"We're talking about an investment in the one resource every other region of the country wishes they had: our beautiful ocean and beaches," said Councilman Jack Weiss, an advocate of dropping lawsuits against water pollution rules. For too long, he added, "the city has been fighting environmental regulations in court rather than fighting to clean up the bay."

On Wednesday, environmentalists joined city and county leaders to praise the landmark agreement to clean up trash flowing into the 51-mile river.

The deal, which still must be ratified by the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, would settle a lawsuit filed by the city and county that challenged the board's mandate to reduce trash going into the river 10% annually over 10 years.

The water board's staff and chairwoman negotiated the compromise, which requires the city and county to cut rubbish flowing into the river and Ballona Creek 50% by September 2008, when state regulators will consider whether further rules are needed.

The agreement also gives local officials more flexibility in trying less-costly methods of reducing trash.

"Instead of trashing the river, we will be cleaning and protecting it," City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo said in announcing the proposed agreement Wednesday along the river's edge near downtown.

Local officials said they will pursue a combination of strategies for reducing trash going into the largely concrete waterway, including high-tech filtering devices to keep trash from entering the river through storm drains and from catch basins.

Low-tech nets and screens will also be tried, and city officials will step up street sweeping as well as anti-littering education and enforcement in areas where trash is routinely dumped in the gutter.

The agreement was praised as a good beginning by representatives of environmental groups, including Santa Monica BayKeeper and Friends of the L.A. River.

"It demonstrates a new environmental leadership in Los Angeles," said Mark Gold, executive director of Heal the Bay. "The leadership has decided it is time to stop wasting time and money on litigation and focus on cleaning up the water."

David Beckman, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said he hoped other cities in Los Angeles County would take note of these decisions and drop their lawsuits against the state's new suite of water pollution rules.

"We've always maintained these cases lacked merit," Beckman said. "It raises a pointed question: Why should other cities be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on litigation which is against the public interest?"

Yet Jeff Hobbs, a spokesman for a group of cities calling itself the Coalition for Practical Regulation, said small municipalities have no intention of dropping their lawsuits.

"We have no choice but to litigate, because the alternative is to spend hundreds of millions of taxpayer [dollars] for programs that have not been proven to work or provide environmental litigation," he said.

A couple dozen inland cities continue to press legal challenges on legal and technical grounds, even through their fundamental concern has been the cost of cleaning up polluted streams, beaches and coastal waters.

But some of these lawsuits are beginning to fail.

Earlier this year, a judge dismissed a suit against the tightening of storm-water pollution rules in San Diego County.

And a federal judge in San Francisco tossed out a legal challenge to ever-tightening rules on trash pollution. Her opinion denounced the cities for the "reprehensible" behavior of filing "meritless" legal claims.

Although the city of Los Angeles has retreated from the legal strategy of challenging the runoff rules, it continues to fight a lawsuit brought by Santa Monica BayKeeper to force the upgrade of the city's antiquated network of sewer lines. The battle goes on even though the city has admitted liability for 3,600 sewage spills that have polluted neighborhoods and fouled the ocean.

Steve Fleischli, BayKeeper's director, said he hoped Wednesday's announcements signal that the city might agree to fix the sewage system and settle the suit without a trial, which is scheduled for next spring.

On Wednesday, environmentalists and city leaders ignored such ongoing disputes to focus on a common goal: cleaning up the river.

Attending the announcement in the graffiti-covered concrete channel were six members of the City Council, some of whom recalled swimming in the river as children but voiced dismay that county health officials have deemed the water too polluted for human contact.

When the river is not fed by rain, much of its water is the effluent from sewage treatment plants upstream.

While the council voted unanimously to approve the agreement, the deal was backed Tuesday by a 3-2 vote of the county Board of Supervisors, with Don Knabe and Mike Antonovich dissenting.

County officials estimate that they will have to spend \$48 million in the next decade to meet the trash-reduction goals in unincorporated areas.

City officials put their cost at \$120 million.