

# Stop Trashing the Ocean

Los Angeles Times **EDITORIAL** April 10, 2004

It's only April, but the weather is oscillating into summer, so of course we're all headed to the beach. One question before dipping in a toe: How safe do we feel about those possibly germy waves? A second question: How long before Southern California gets serious about the urban runoff that has turned a refreshing splash into a pollution guessing game?

As the daily reports from California's beaches tell us, the fouling of ocean waters has gone from occasional post-rainstorm ickiness to a continuous fact of coastal life. Every day, at least half a dozen local beaches exceed the state standards for bacteria.

Daily testing regulations make the waters off California the most vetted in the nation. But it takes 24 hours to get results on those tests, as researchers at UC Irvine recently reported. By the time a beach is posted as contaminated, changing currents might have swirled the bacteria away. More scarily, water that showed up fine on its last test might now contain a nasty brew.

Quicker tests are on the way, but their value also will be limited. Water conditions can change within hours, even minutes. Viruses live longer in the ocean water than the bacteria that health officials look for in water samples.

Though the state's stringent testing laws were a step forward against the risks swimmers unwittingly took for years, they don't keep us safe.

Another UC Irvine study, published this week, ratifies common sense: Frequent swimmers at Southern California beaches were more likely to get sick than their counterparts in the cleaner waves off Santa Cruz County. A third recent UC Irvine study pointed to urban runoff as the most likely cause of the big summer beach closure of 1999 in Huntington Beach.

Urban runoff — the mix of pathogens and other pollutants that washes to the ocean through streams and storm drains — originates with everything from pet owners who don't pick up after their dogs to industries that illegally connect to the storm drain system to get rid of waste. Rainwater also picks up lawn fertilizers and pesticides, litter and oil from streets even hundreds of miles inland. It's going to take more than stenciling the warning "Leads to Ocean" above each storm drain to get results.

Runoff is a regional problem, yet dozens of cities — almost all of them far from the ocean, wouldn't you guess — have thrown up blockades to avoid meaningful action. The water board that covers parts of Orange and Riverside counties required cities to review their general plans to see if they'd adequately considered water quality. The requirement raised an outcry from almost every city that the water board was interfering with land-use authority.

The mayor of one inland city complains that his city is almost fully developed, and

reviewing the general plan would do no good. But the city of Newport Beach is also nearly built out, yet it finds plenty that can be done. Fixes can be as simple as a grassy swath to absorb runoff water before it hits a drain.

Newport Beach is taking several other steps that many other cities have declared impossible. Its code-enforcement officers issue citations to residents who, for example, hose off their filthy driveways and let the oil and garbage run into storm drains. Its enforcement of the pooper-scooper law has led to howls from equestrians who felt they should be exempt. The city sends remote cameras through storm drains to find companies illegally dumping waste.

So serious is Newport Beach about runoff that it handed out 250 of the 257 citations for runoff pollution in Orange County during the last year.

The San Diego water board is crafting rules requiring homeowners to wash cars in nonpolluting ways. Those could involve using biodegradable soaps or keeping water from running into the street by washing on a lawn that absorbs the water. The complainers have some legitimate gripes. The state's water boards laid down ambitious rules without fully working out the costs. A coalition of about half of L.A. County's cities won a judge's ruling in January that the state had imposed a trash cleanup law without doing the required economic studies. And if municipal budgets were ever tighter, it's hard to remember when — though cities also were dragging their heels a few years ago when they were flush.

As with smog, reducing polluted runoff will be a complicated, long-term task. It will mean some changes in daily life — like sprinklers that water the plants, not the street, or using a broom for the gutter, not a full-force blast from the hose. And it won't come free. Sadly, voters in Seal Beach didn't grasp the benefit when two years ago they rejected a dollar-a-month fee for extra street sweeping — an effective method of reducing runoff.

Why a city has to go to voters for a dollar-a-month increase is a separate problem. Legislation by Assemblyman Tom Harman (R-Huntington Beach) would fix it, allowing cities to fund runoff projects just as they do sewer and trash service, with a fee levied on homeowner tax bills.

The costs of foul beaches — to tourism, to quality of life, to the health of the ocean — are far more than the few dollars a month it would cost each homeowner.