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Utility fined for spilling chemicals into Polhemus Creek, killing steelhead trout

By Julia Scott
 San Mateo County Times
 Posted: 05/31/2009 05:47:41 PM PDT
 Updated: 06/01/2009 06:13:22 AM PDT

SAN MATEO — A private utility that provides drinking water to the city of San Mateo has been fined for spilling chemicals into Polhemus Creek, killing more than 30 protected steelhead trout.

Although the incident occurred nearly two years ago, the California Water Service Co. was slapped with a \$199,350 fine last week from the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board for the fish kill and for failing to report the problem until local biologists noticed dead fish in the creek, according to the complaint.

The water board said at least 32 steelhead trout, a federally threatened species, died in September 2007 after two incidents in which the water purveyor accidentally spilled about 93,000 gallons of chloraminated drinking water into Polhemus Creek after a machine malfunctioned. Polhemus Creek flows through a watershed east of Crystal Springs Reservoir and is a main tributary of San Mateo Creek.

Chloramines have come to replace chlorine as the principal disinfectant in drinking water. It is harmless to humans but not to aquatic life, and it was discharged into the creek at concentrations well above the amount known to be lethal to fish in a scientific study, according to the water board.

"That's the funny thing: People think of drinking water as not being a problem, but when you see the reaction with the species in the creek you realize it can be toxic," said Dyan Whyte, assistant executive officer at the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

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Whyte said such spills can be fairly common where water pipes leak or systems break down, as was the case with Cal Water.

The spills occurred Sept. 25 and Sept. 27, 2007. The first lasted 45 minutes, but the second spill was undetected for seven hours.

To add insult to injury, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, or SFPUC, was in the midst of a major creek restoration project to improve habitat for steelhead and other species when the spills occurred, overwhelming the creek bypass they had created and eroding the riverbank they had been working to restore, according to Whyte.

It was only after SFPUC biologists began noticing the dead fish and alerted Cal Water about the magnitude of the chemical spill that the water company took action, according to the complaint. The creek restoration project was not irreversibly damaged.

Cal Water spokeswoman Shannon Dean said the computer problem that triggered the chemical spill has long since been resolved as part of a \$500,000 upgrade to the water tank in question, near Polhemus Creek.

Dean predicted that the water board would likely reduce the penalty because of the money the company had spent on the upgrades. If it does not, the company plans to appeal the fine.

"We do understand the impact that treated water can have on aquatic life, which is why we made this rather large investment. We responded proactively and took it very seriously," she said.

Dean also cast doubt on the chloramines as the cause of the fish kill, despite the complaint's allegations.

"It's really unclear whether the fish were killed by the tank overflows or the high turbidity (cloudy water) in the creek," she

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Three dead steelhead trout are collected from Polhemus Creek by biologists in September 2007. The...

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said. "By all indications there was a rainstorm at the time, and the SFPUC creek restoration project was going on."

Less than a half an inch of rain fell Sept. 22, five days before biologists noticed the dead fish. Both the water board and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have ruled out the rainstorm as a likely cause of the fish kill, according to the complaint.

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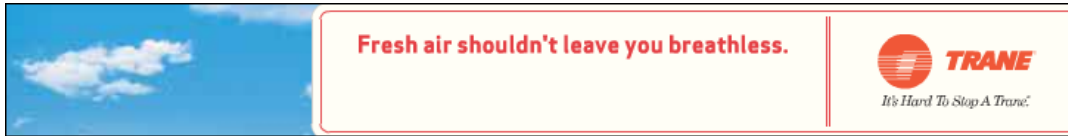
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