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Thursday Sep 18

Group slams Bay water quality

Environmentalists name worst trashed stream, call for cleanup

By Paul Rogers

Vast amounts of trash - from Styrofoam cups to old tires - pollute nearly all of the streams that flow into San Francisco Bay, according to an environmental advocacy group that is pushing for new regulations to protect the region's water.

In a new report released Wednesday, Save the Bay highlighted nearly two dozen clogged streams where the environmental group says debris endangers wildlife and human health.

Among the Top 10 "Bay Trash Hot Spots" most choked with litter: Guadalupe River and Coyote Creek in San Jose; Saratoga Creek in Saratoga; Cerrito Creek in El Cerrito and Damon Slough, which rings the McAfee Coliseum in Oakland.

"These are the worst spots around the Bay. People would be shocked to see the photos," said Jessica Castelli, a spokeswoman for Save the Bay.

"They don't realize that a candy wrapper that fell out of their hand or a plastic grocery bag that blew out of their car can very easily make it to the Bay. And when you think that there are 7 million of us who live around the Bay, all of our impacts really can add up."

The group, which ranked the streams based on photos from its volunteers and surveys by state water quality officials, is pushing for three reforms.

First, it is urging Bay Area residents to volunteer for the annual California Coastal Cleanup, which takes place from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday. Last year, more than 61,000 people statewide collected more than 903,000 pounds of trash and recyclables along coastal beaches, but also along inland streams and Bayfront marshes.

In the 2007 cleanup, Santa Clara County lagged behind most other Bay Area counties, with only 908 volunteers, compared to 4,506 in Alameda County, though county volunteers removed a lot of trash: 32,859 pounds - more than any other Bay Area county except Solano, where 55,475 pounds were removed and Contra Costa, where 46,216 pounds were removed.

"I think people do see it as more of an ocean beach cleanup, but there's a big need along the Bay, if not more than along the beach," Castelli said.

Oakland-based Save the Bay also is pushing for state water regulators to name 23 streams and creeks around San Francisco Bay as "impaired" for trash pollution under the Clean Water Act. Such designations, which have historically been for pollutants like mercury or pesticides, require the state to draw up a plan to bring the water bodies affected back to environmental health.

In the case of trash, that could mean requiring Bay Area cities to put trash-catching devices over storm drain pipes, to crack down more on businesses that pollute - like supermarkets whose dumpsters cause litter to blow into the streets, and to provide more garbage cans at public parks.

The San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board is scheduled to make a decision on the designations by the end of next month. In 2001, state water officials in Los Angeles declared the Los Angeles River impaired by trash. Three years later, Los Angeles voters approved a \$500 million bond to fund trash cleanups, flood control and water pollution reduction.

Finally, Save the Bay also is pushing the San Francisco regional water board to impose tough new trash rules for storm drain permits for Bay Area cities, since nearly all garbage on the street washes into storm drains and is flushed into the Bay, where it harms wildlife and can drift into the ocean.

"Trash is harming water quality," said Castelli. "It's killing animals in the bay."

For more information:

To see the full list of the "Trash Hot Spots," go to www.savesfbay.org and to volunteer for the Coastal Cleanup, call 800-COAST-4U or go to www.coast4u.org.

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Top Trash "Hot Spots" around the San Francisco Bay:

1. Cerrito Creek (El Cerrito)
2. Coyote Creek (San Jose)
3. Saratoga Creek (Saratoga)
4. Colma Creek (South San Francisco)
5. Guadalupe River (San Jose)
6. Rindler Creek (Vallejo)
7. Baxter Creek (El Cerrito/Richmond)
8. Sausal Creek (Oakland)
9. Damon Slough (Oakland)
10. Strawberry Creek (Berkeley)
17. San Mateo Creek (San Mateo)
18. Permanente Creek (Los Altos)
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Source: Save the Bay

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