

## Coastal Post Online



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### Officials Ignore Toxic Killing Pond In Novato

By Elena Belsky

Pacheco Pond Wildlife Area in Novato, is in trouble. For many months, neighbors and a local environmental group have been reporting severe problems with the pond's water and population of wildlife (or rather, lack thereof) to the City of Novato, County of Marin Environmental Health Services (EHS), SF Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, California State Department of Toxic Substances Control, Fish and Game, Federal Wildlife, Coast Guard-just about anyone they can think to contact. They have even called the Novato Fire District repeatedly, to report noxious fumes of chemical and heavy "sulfur" odors.

Since chemical odors emanating from Pacheco Pond began, local residents and office workers complain of headaches, nausea and a foul taste in the throat. One group of office workers in a building bordering on the pond were so frustrated with witnessing the daily problems, that last year they decided to keep a log of incidents, fish kills, and phone calls. So far, efforts of local environmental advocates have only produced one documentable response-one water test from the City of Novato taken on October, 26, 2000. They only tested for coliform and attempted to identify a white, milky substance clouding the water-the results were inconclusive and not quantitative. According to City staff, no follow up testing was done. The County of Marin's Environmental Health Services Department was unaware of the City of Novato's test results, nor it seems, had they conducted any testing of their own, at the time of publication.

In December 2000, a newly formed watershed group called Friends of Novato Creek (FNC) and WaterKeepers Northern California joined forces to investigate potential sources of the Pacheco Pond problems. The Wildlife Area is surrounded by a number of possible sources of contamination: Hamilton Air Force Base and Pacheco Creek drain in from the south; an Industrial Park and Arroyo de San Jose to the west; and depending whether the flaps of the culverts are open or closed, the Novato Sanitary District waste discharge point and Novato Creek to the north.

An ever worsening series of "events" seems to be plaguing Pacheco Pond Wildlife Area. Friends of Novato Creek director, Sue Lattanzio says that on Memorial Day weekend 2000, there was a mass fish die-off of over two hundred striped bass in Pacheco Pond, adjacent Novato Creek and Bel Marin Keys. And then a series of "sulfur" odor problems and smaller fish kills were reported in late October through the first week of November.

Reports Edward Mainland of FNC, " Captain Mark Landman of Novato Fire District told me of the wide range of locations reporting the sulfur odor-from south of Hamilton to west of Highway 101 in Ignacio. It was a major, widespread event, noted by hundreds of residents."

In a recent letter to the State Department of Toxic Substances Control, WaterKeeper Northern California states the following: "Neighbors of Pacheco Pond Wildlife Area have witnessed repeated large fish kills, reduced numbers of waterfowl, and indicator species reduction or elimination over the last five years. They have also noticed and reported water quality problems, unusual odors and colors in the water, and "plumes" of suspended substances. These wetland areas are critical habitat and have the potential to support State and Federally listed species." The WaterKeeper letter also raises concerns regarding potential Hamilton Air Force Base contributions

to water quality problems in the area: " The question of the migration of contaminants in sub-surface drainages, the underlying water table, creeks, ponds and wetlands must be addressed immediately through a comprehensive testing program including surface water, sediments and soils throughout the property."

As a culmination of these progressive events, on November 8, members of the Marin County Sheriff's Dive Team were taken ill upon entering the waters of Pacheco Pond. On all exposed skin (their faces) they felt a "burning sensation;" the Team members immediately got out of the water. One diver unfortunately swallowed a mouthful of pond water when his mouthpiece caught on a branch upon exiting, and became nauseous. The Dive Team decided not to go back into the possibly contaminated water, and placed an emergency call to the Novato Fire District for assistance. Not so coincidentally, the Fire District was in the area searching for the source of the noxious "sulfur" smell that had been reported the past few weeks, and were available to decontaminate the Dive Team and their equipment quickly. Detective Rick Navarro who was in charge of the Dive Team, reported the incident and possible contamination site to Marin County Environmental Health Department. If any testing has been done by the City, County, Regional Board or any other government agency subsequent to the November incident, it seems that no documentation or notification have been provided to the County EHS or the Sheriff's Department.

It is not clear what is happening in Pacheco Pond, but residents and office workers are concerned for their health and safety, and that of the Wildlife Area. People fish in the pond regularly, walk the shoreline, and children play near the water. It is a populated area, where locals talk of the once abundant marine life, waterfowl and fish, and of their disappearance within just the past few years. Friends of Novato Creek and WaterKeepers are calling for immediate and comprehensive water and sediment testing for the pond. Perhaps it's not too late to return the Pond to a state of health and ecological balance.

For more information on the Novato Creek watershed, or to report incidents, contact Friends of Novato Creek: 415 883-8339 or . WaterKeepers Northern California has an incident hotline for Marin and the entire Bay region, 1-800-KEEPBAY.

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