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Another Toxic Fish Kill At Pacheco Pond

By Elena Belsky

On April 19th, 2001, a second fish kill and white "plume" incident within 6 months occurred in Ignacio Reservoir/Pacheco pond in Novato. Fishermen along the channel connecting Novato Creek and Pacheco Pond noticed hundreds of small fish which were dead or dying—some were jumping up out of the water in an attempt to escape. Steelhead trout (a Federally Protected species), juvenile striped bass, smelt, and bullheads were among the casualties observed. Novato Creek and environs are considered Endangered Species habitat including steelhead and salmon spawning grounds. Just hours before the toxic incident occurred, a local fisherman caught a steelhead nearby. A white, milky plume was seen entering and emanating from Pacheco Pond where the flood gates had just been removed, and a strong, obnoxious sulfur-like odor was noted within a large area surrounding the Pond and Novato Creek.

Responding to concerned citizens calls, local watershed activist Sue Lattanzio of Friends of Novato Creek, found Marin County Flood Control workers removing all the flood gates between Pacheco Pond and Novato Creek. The subsequent high tide and turbulent scouring action produced by the forceful inflow of water from Novato Creek into Pacheco Pond appeared to stir up the sediment, including a milky white plume of an unknown, suspended substance. Ms. Lattanzio proceeded to collect and preserve fish carcasses, and water and sediment samples for analysis. While taking one of the water samples from the area of the milky plume, she accidentally touched the pond water and immediately experienced a burning sensation on her hand. All samples were authorized by the West Bay Section Leader of the Surface Waters Division, Susan Gladstone, to be taken to the Regional Water Quality Control Board's testing lab in Petaluma, where results are pending.

Once again, there was a sulfur stench so pervasive and intense accompanying the fish kills and milky plume, that nearby office workers, residents, and passers by expressed concerns that this latest incident was a continuation of similar noxious and toxic events from September, October and November of 2000.

The Marin County Sheriff's Dive Team was involved in one of these events, experienced a burning sensation on their skin on contact with the water, and nausea and dizziness upon exiting the Pond (as reported in the February 2001 Coastal Post). Also reported in the February Coastal Post article "Officials Ignore Toxic Killing Pond In Novato," was the San Francisco BayKeeper (1 800-KEEPBAY) and Friends of Novato Creek (415 883-8339) issuance of a joint letter to the Regional Water Quality Control Board, urging swift action and "calling for immediate and comprehensive water and sediment testing for the Pond." While the two environmental groups requested a written response, none was ever provided. In the last six months, only two water samples have been taken by the City of Novato and then by the Regional Board, both of which were limited in testing, and proved inconclusive.

In a memo to the Regional Board the morning after the April 19th toxic event, Friends of Novato Creek stated, "We would hope to see the water and sediment samples analyzed from this incident immediately, as this presents an environmental as well as health and safety hazard." With subsequent daily tidal flows, the sediment and unknown milky "plume" was repeatedly pulled out into the main channel of Novato Creek, ultimately ending up in San Pablo Bay. The discharge of pollutants to the waters of the State is a violation of the Clean Water Act, and the "taking" of Protected Species (generally defined as harming fish or habitat in any way) is a violation of the Endangered Species Act.

Repeated incidents of water quality problems in Pacheco Pond and Novato Creek indicate the need for the issue to be addressed in a thorough and complete manner, not on an emergency, case by case basis. Pacheco Pond is adjacent to the lower section of Novato Creek, which is a critical entrance area to the Endangered Species habitat. Any contamination or water quality problems in this area could jeopardize the entire stretch of creek habitat, making the waters uninhabitable and uninhabitable for aquatic species. It is unknown if this is a temporary water quality issue, but the repetitive and similar

symptoms of the toxic episodes indicate the problem is ongoing and unremediated. Once again, local watershed advocates, neighbors, recreational users, and fishermen are calling for help for Pacheco Pond and Novato Creek
