

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS For

# Drainage, Watershed and Water Quality

Last Revised October 16, 2007

#### **Introduction:**

The following questions have been organized in the categories below. We have attempted to group the questions from more general to more specific/technical in nature. Each group of questions is in a different file. You should go to the file that appears to relate best to your question.

#### **Frequently Asked Questions for:**

- Drainage, Watershed and Water Quality
- Property Owners Near Creeks
- <u>Developers and Engineers</u> and
- <u>Definitions of Terms</u>

If you have questions that you cannot find in this document, please call the Flood Control District at (925) 313-2000 and ask for the Flood Control. Someone will do their best to address you question.

In the PDF version of this document, the Table of Contents can be used to jump to the responses to the questions. Use the "Navigation" toolbar to jump back to the List of Questions.

Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District<sup>1</sup>

255 Glacier Drive Martinez, CA 94553 Phone: (925) 313-2000 FAX: (925) 313-2333

http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/depart/pw/floodcontrol/Flood.html

#### **Maintenance Division:**

Phone: (925) 313-7000 FAX: (925) 313-7014

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Flood Control District is in the County Public Works Building

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### **GENERAL DRAINAGE QUESTIONS**

### 1) Who maintains the creek, channel, or drainage pipe?

Typically, the Contra Costa County Public Works Department maintains unincorporated county public roadway drainage facilities such as roadway cross culverts, roadside ditches, and storm drains 30 inches in diameter or larger within a public right-of-way or easements. Cities maintain the same types of facilities in their own jurisdictions, but the pipe size criteria may vary.

The Flood Control District maintains facilities in their rights-of-way and easements. This includes large improved drainage channels, detention basins, and dams that serve as regional drainage facilities. The Flood Control District also maintains properties it owns that do not have drainage facilities on them. Many of these properties are either remainders from completed projects or planned for future drainage projects.

The Flood Control District or County will maintain a creek if they have fee title to the creek or have some other property right, such as an easement.

Most creeks in Contra Costa County are privately owned and property owners maintain natural creeks and other types of drainage facilities (storm drain pipes, concrete or earthen ditches) on private property and private roads. Private owners are also responsible for maintaining driveway culverts even if in the public road right-of-way. You should check with your City on this issue if your property is with in the City Limit.

### 2) Who owns and maintains the drainage pipe that crosses my property?

A drainage pipe or ditch may cross private property and be inside a County or private drainage easement. There are restrictions on what property owners can and can't do on the land within such easements. In general, no permanent structures can be built within an easement and no alterations can be made to the pipe or ditch without a permit from the County.

You can find information about a drainage easement on your property in your title report or in public records. Copies of the Assessors Maps and other land documents are available at the Public Works Department at 255 Glacier Drive in Martinez [phone (925) 313-2000]. The County does not automatically accept drainage easements that are dedicated to the County. If the pipe within the dedicated easement needs to be cleaned out or repaired, the County will process the required paperwork to accept the drainage easement and perform the required maintenance under some circumstances.

Private drainage easements have similar restrictions and maintenance of the drainage facility in the easement would be done by the property owner or whoever the easement is owned by. Each situation is unique and requires research to determine who is responsible for maintaining the facility.

#### **3**) A drainage inlet or pipe is clogged, a tree has fallen into the creek, or my neighbor has affected the drainage on my property, who do I call?

If the drainage facility is located on private property and not within a public right-of-way, the homeowner is responsible for correcting the problem. In an emergency, if an obstruction is blocking flows within a creek with the potential of flooding three or more homes, the County can be called to remove it. However, the County may bill the property owner for costs to remove the obstruction.

If the drainage facility is publicly owned and maintained, call the appropriate number below for assistance.

### Drainage Facility located in unincorporated County

County Maintenance Division, (925) 313-7000

Flood Control District<sup>2</sup> Facility in Flood Control District Right-of-Way: County Public Works/Flood Control District, (925) 313-2000

#### Facility located in City:

Please contact your City's public works office.

#### 4) Will Flood Control remove fallen trees?

Generally, the Flood Control District will only remove fallen trees within the limits of Flood Control rights-of-way and easements where Flood Control facilities have been constructed. Flood Control removes trees and other debris only to the extent necessary to assure that the material will not float downstream and become a flow obstruction. As maintenance policy, wood is left onsite, above the creek bank and away from high flows that might carry it away.

#### 5) Why don't you maintain the creek like a park with mowing, landscaping, pruning, etc? Why don't you use public funds to actively maintain the creek like funding is used for active park maintenance?

Due to restricted funding, the Flood Control District provides only the maintenance necessary to assure the function of the creek/channel as a storm drainage or flood control system. The systems Flood Control maintains are only in Flood Control right-of-way.

The County maintains storm drain pipes, roadside ditches within County Road right-ofway, and public bridge crossings where debris might collect.

The Flood Control District and County cannot perform maintenance on creeks/channels that are privately owned for land right, liability, and other legal reasons. General Plan policies and State and Federal Environmental Regulations also limit maintenance activities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (Flood Control District) is staffed by Contra Costa County Public Works Department employees and its office is at the same location as the Public Works Department

#### There is a homeless encampment in the Flood Control right-of-way. OR **6**)

#### **7**) There are kids playing in District property and making lots of noise.

For specific help on homeless encampments or illegal use of District right-of-way, contact our Maintenance office at (925) 313-7000. After hours or if there is an immediate threat or emergency, call 911.

#### **8**) Why don't you remove debris jams during storms?

From a practical point of view, the Flood Control District does not place the lives of its employees in danger during high flow events. Therefore, it is usually not possible to remove debris jams safely during flooding. This work is completed as soon as it is safe to do so.

#### Who do I contact about FEMA<sup>3</sup> floodplain issues? 9)

### Within unincorporated County:

Public Works Department, Engineering Services Division Public Works, (925) 313-2351 or (925) 313-20000 Permit Center (925) 335-1375

Within City: Please contact the City's engineering office

#### **10**) Who do I contact to obtain rainfall data?

County Public Works Department, Flood Control Division - Hydrology Section (925) 313-2000

#### **11**) What was the return period for the storm the other day?

The Flood Control District operates and maintains 20+ of its own recording rain gauges. You can find recent information data from these rain gauges by going to www.co.contracosta.ca.us/depart/pw/content/Hydrology.html . The Hydrology Staff also monitors others' gauges by visiting web sites for other rain gauges operated by other agencies.

The rainfall return period may vary throughout the County and so the rainfall return period is specific to the location of the rain gauge. The Flood Control District can perform an independent analysis on each rain gauge. A typical rain gauge is 8 inches in diameter and can only tell us what is happening at that location. There is some chance that an isolated storm cell will miss a rain gauge and the gauge will not measure the intensity<sup>4</sup> of the storm that you experienced.

The time in which the rainfall occurs is also important. For example, a gauge may record a 25-year storm for a 15 minute time period, but the 1-hour rainfall intensity may be less than a 5-year storm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> FEMA = Federal Emergency Management Agency

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Rainfall intensity is measured in inches of rain fall per hour, or inches/hour (in/hr).

For significant storms, the District performs a detailed analysis of several rain gauges and may also compare the results of the rainfall analysis with stream flow measurements done by others.

To ask for a return period on a specific storm call:

County Public Works Department, Flood Control Division – Hydrology Section Hydrographer, (925) 313-2292 or (925) 313-2000 Sr. Hydrologist, (925) 313-2274 or (925) 313-2000

### 12) What is a Flood Control Zone (FCZ)?

A Flood Control Zone is a part of Contra Costa County in which a property tax is collected to fund Flood Control projects and facilities maintenance. The Zones have boundaries that usually coincide with a watershed. Examples of Zones include the Marsh Creek Watershed (Zone 1), the Walnut Creek San Ramon Creek Watershed (Zone 3B), the Rodeo Creek Watershed (Zone 8), and the Pinole Creek Watershed (Zone 9).

The Flood Control Zones were formed back in the 1950s and 1960s and provided local funding for much of the major flood control facilities that we have and maintain today in those zones. Prior to Proposition 13, Zone Boards, which consisted of representatives from the watersheds, adjusted the tax rates of these zones annually. When Proposition 13 came around, several of the zone facilities were constructed, maintenance was updated and there was enough money in the funds to set the tax rate very low or at zero. In 1978, Proposition 13 froze those tax rates, in effect shutting off the tax revenue needed to adequately fund the maintenance of the Zones' flood control facilities.

The State responded by setting up the "Special District Augmentation Fund." This fund provided assistance for many years until, during a State budget crisis, the Fund was removed from the State budget. Today the several Zones remain under funded and some have no tax revenue at all. The District is actively seeking ways to deal with the lack of funding for maintenance.

### 13) What is a Drainage Area (DA)?

A Drainage Area is an area in Contra Costa County where new development projects must pay fees for the construction of drainage and flood control facilities that will support the overall development of the area. Drainage Areas have a boundary, a Drainage Plan (showing assumed land use, where areas are to drain, and planned facilities), and a Fee Ordinance. The fee is in the units of dollars per square foot of impervious surface. The fee is calculated by dividing the cost to construct the Drainage Area Plan by the estimated future impervious surface created by the land development that could occur in the watershed based on the General Plan. By following the drainage area plan and paying the fees, future development mitigates for its impact to the drainage facilities in the watershed.

## 14) I am a lawyer and need information from your files. Can you get that information for me? Does it cost anything? Can you analyze it for me?

We can provide up to 12 months of data via fax at no charge if the data is readily available. Beyond that there will be a fee to cover our staff time. We do provide basic analysis of storm data for no fee. For extensive analysis that is not readily available we will apply our "Fee for Service" policy, which is primarily a time and materials charge policy and requires an initial deposit. If the information you are requesting is related to a case or lawsuit that involves the Flood Control District or County, all requests must be made through the County Council office and the "Fee for Service" policy will apply.

### 15) What kind of facilities does Flood Control District design?

The Flood Control District designs flood control facilities and their appurtenant features. These include open channels, maintenance roads, fencing and gates, landscaping, grade control (drop) structures, closed conduit storm drainpipes, manholes, detention basins, and basin outlet structures. There is a growing movement towards creek and habitat restoration. The Flood Control District is increasingly involved in using bioengineering techniques and fluvial geomorphologic principles in its designs.

## 16) I'm not a big developer and not an engineer. Can Flood Control design my drainage system for me?

Due to liability concerns, the Flood Control District cannot directly design your facility for you. We can assist in determining design flow rates for larger watersheds using our HYDRO6 program that calculates storm hydrographs based on Flood Control District standards.

### WATERSHED QUESTIONS

### 17) What is a watershed and how do I affect it?

A watershed is an area of land that catches and drains water into a creek, stream or river via direct runoff or smaller tributaries and eventually ends up in a large body of water such as the Delta, Bay or ocean. As stormwater flows over land and across the watershed into the creek, it carries polluted urban runoff such as used motor oil and grease, pesticides, trash and other harmful debris. This is where the public comes in. The more we can prevent polluting the watershed, the healthier our waterways will be and the habitat it supports.

## 18) Who do I contact to get more involved in what's happening in the watersheds in Contra Costa County.

Contact the Conservation Programs Planner in the Contra Costa County Community Development Dept at (925) 335-1230 and ask for the staff to the Contra Costa Watershed Forum, an ad-hoc group of thirty or more creek and watershed restoration and protection related groups and agencies in the County. The Watershed Forum's website is <a href="http://www.cocowaterweb.org">http://www.cocowaterweb.org</a>.

# 19) I saw someone discharge waste water in large quantity or constructing a permanent fixture on a creek bank. I am not sure if this activity is permitted. Who should I call?

Both wastewater discharge activities and construction activities on creek banks need permits from appropriate government agencies. For wastewater discharge, please contact Please call (800) No-Dumping For altering creek banks and/or creek beds, please contact the California Department of Fish and Game at (925) 376-1274.

If the potential polluter is still there and can be found, call 911 and report the problem. For non-emergency reports of wastewater discharge, please contact the Contra Costa County Environmental Health Division weekdays between 7:30 AM and 5:00 PM, or the Sheriff's Communication Center at (925) 646-2441 at other times. For altering creek banks and/or creek beds, please contact the California Department of Fish and Game at (925) 376-1274.

### 20) I want to volunteer for creek cleanup activities. Where can I get information on where these activities are held?

The Contra Costa Watershed Forum has a calendar of events on their website, where creek related volunteer activities are listed. Its website address is http://www.cocowaterweb.org. Also, the Volunteer Center of Contra Costa in Walnut Creek has a list of creek related volunteer activities, in addition to other kinds of volunteer activities. The Center's website address is http://www.helpnow.org.

## 21) I want to know where creeks are located in the County. Where can I obtain a map?

The Contra Costa County Community Development Department created the Contra Costa Watershed Atlas in 2003. This includes beautiful maps of creeks in the County and related beneficial information. The map is on sale at the County Community Development Department at 651 Pine Street, North Wing, Fourth Floor, Martinez, CA 94553. It is \$25.00 (cash, money order or check only). If you would like to have the Atlas mailed to you, please send a check in the amount of \$30 (\$25.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping and handling). If you have questions about your order, please contact the Department at 925-335-1290.

### 22) Who do I call to get involved in volunteer water quality monitoring?

You may want to join a creek watershed group in the area you are interested in performing volunteer water quality monitoring and find out if they are interested in continuing or initiating water quality monitoring.

Please contact the State Water Resources Control Board at scochrane@waterboards.ca.gov or (510) 622-2337. Also, contact your City's Clean Water Program, which are often found under Public Works Department or Community Development Department.

## I am a teacher and I want to find out about environmental programs I can get my students involved in. Who do I contact?

The Watershed Project based in Richmond provides environmental education programs for educators in the Bay Area. Its website is www.thewatershedproject.org.

## 24) How can I find out about classes, workshops and seminars on stormwater quality issues?

Look at the Contra Costa Clean Water website at <a href="www.cccleanwater.org">www.cccleanwater.org</a> under "members" then "workshops", or call them at (925) 313-2360 for information.

## What can I do to improve the environment of the watershed in my community?

Use common sense. Pollutants that reach the storm drain system or creeks have a negative impact on our environment. Find out more information about the environment and watersheds in your community. You can find information on watersheds and the environment at many websites and in publications distributed by your municipalities:

Some good web sites to visit are:

- Contra Costa Clean Water Program at <a href="https://www.cccleanwater.org">www.cccleanwater.org</a>
- The Contra Costa Watershed Forum at www.cocowaterweb.org
- The Stormwater Managers' Resource Center at <u>www.stormwatercenter.net</u>

### WATER QUALITY QUESTIONS

For these and other questions go to the Clean Water Program's web site at: <a href="mailto:cccleanwater.org/residents/faq/index.php">cccleanwater.org/residents/faq/index.php</a>.

### 26) Is there a difference between the storm drain and sewer system?

Yes...an important difference. Stormwater and all the pollutants that flow from our homes, parking lots and streets to the gutter into the storm drains discharge directly into our creeks and other water bodies...untreated. Water and pollutants that flow into the sanitary sewer, such as water from our bathtubs and toilet, are sent to wastewater treatment facility before the water is discharged to the Bay, Delta or ocean.

### 27) What is E-waste and how do I properly dispose of it?

E-waste is a popular term for electronic products nearing the end of their "useful life." Products such as computers, computer monitors, televisions, VCRs, stereos, microwaves, and fax machines are common electronic goods. Many of these products can be reused or recycled.

Unfortunately, electronic discards are one of the fastest growing segments of our nation's waste stream. When we improperly dispose of e-waste, the mercury or the lead from the cathode ray tubes leaches into surface and groundwater. Computer monitors and televisions are banned from disposal in landfills due to the high amounts of lead they contain.

Some cities allow residents to bring it to a household hazardous waste facility or drop-off event. Contact your city to get information on your e-waste recycling program.

### 28) How do I dispose of my mercury thermometers?

Anything containing mercury is considered a household hazardous waste. It can be found in products such as thermometers, fluorescent lighting and watch batteries. You can dispose of mercury at household hazardous waste (HHW)facilities near you.

- East County: 2500 Pittsburg Antioch Highway, Antioch, CA (925) 756-1900
- Central County: 4797 Imhoff Place, Martinez, CA (800) 646-1431
- West County: 101 Pittsburg Ave, San Pablo, CA, (888) 412-9277

### 29) The creek near my house is polluted. What can be done about it?

You can be proactive and inform your neighbors of proper pollution prevention behaviors. You can also start a creek group and promote water health. If there is a toxic spill call 911 and trained firefighters will either clean up the pollution or contact the proper agency, depending on the nature of the pollutant. For the proper number to call for your area, call 1-800-NO DUMPING to be connected.

### 30) Why should I recycle used motor oil?

Recycling the motor oil from your car, truck, motorcycle, boat, RV or lawnmower is one way that you can demonstrate your commitment to protect the environment for future generations while conserving energy resources. Used motor oil contains heavy metals and other harmful contaminates that negatively impact the environment. We waste energy when we discard used oil into the environment.

In the U.S. approximately 42 million gallons a year of used motor oil are poured down drains, sewers or on the ground, and 52 million gallons are disposed in the trash by people who change their own oil. Compare this to the 10 million gallons spilled by the Exxon Valdez in Alaska in 1989, or the 150 million gallons spilled in the Persian Gulf in 1991.

Improper disposal of used oil costs money...your money! You pay in higher consumer prices, taxes for environmental cleanups, and increased health care costs when wastes are improperly managed. Recycling saves money and protects the environment.

### 31) There's oil in the street in front of my house. What should I do about it?

If you can't determine who is responsible for the pollution, sprinkle it with kitty litter, sweep up the soiled absorbent and place it in a household hazardous waste container for disposal at a HHW facility near you.

### 32) Can I drain my pool into the storm drain?

Only if the water is dechlorinated and has never been treated with copper-based algaecides.

## 33) Leaves and yard clippings are organic. Why can't I put them down the storm drain?

When organic and/or yard waste decays in water, the "breakdown" process removes oxygen from the water that is necessary for the health of all aquatic species from microorganisms to fish. Essentially, it robs the aquatic life of oxygen and suffocates them.

### 34) If I can't dump left over chemicals into the sanitary sewer, what can I do with them?

Take them to your local household hazardous waste facility.

- East County: 2500 Pittsburg Antioch Highway, Antioch, CA (925) 756-1900
- Central County: 4797 Imhoff Place, Martinez, CA (800) 646-1431
- West County: 101 Pittsburg Ave, San Pablo, CA, (888) 412-9277

### 35) Why shouldn't I wash my car at home, I use biodegradable soap?

When washing cars, the water runoff can enter the storm drains. This puts pollutants such as grease, dirt, oil, metals and soap into our local creeks. Even Biodegradable soaps require oxygen to breakdown, depleting our creek of the oxygen fish and other organisms need to survive. Also, just because the soap breaks down, doesn't mean it breaks down into components that should be in the water. It is best to take your car to a car wash where the water is discharged to the Sanitary Sewer System or wash your car on a lawn or other surface where the water can be drained down and filtered through the soil.

### 36) It's ok to rinse my paint supplies out in the gutter, right?

No. It is not OK. All paint equipment needs to be cleaned in a sink that is plumbed to sanitary sewer. Any sink in your house should do. Also, water based paints can be dried out and put in the garbage. But, oil-based paints should be disposed of at a household hazardous waste site.

## 37) What am I supposed to do with my dirty mop water; I don't want to dump it in my clean sink.

If something is too dirty or "gross" for you to want to dump it in a sink in your home, it is definitely not acceptable for the storm drain. The water should go into the sink or pour in onto your yard or dirt to soak into the ground. Remember, only rain down the storm drain!

## 38) Who do I contact to report illegal dumping into creeks and drainage courses?

- If the dumping was observed, first call the County Sheriff's Dispatch, (925) 646-2441 or the City's Police Department (If possible, please take pictures or record the vehicle description/license plate number.).
- 1-800-NO-DUMPING
- Regional Water Quality Control Board, Christine Boschen, (510) 622-2460
- Within unincorporated County/Flood Control District Facility
   County Public Works/Flood Control District, (925) 313-2000
   County Maintenance Division, (925) 313-7000
- Within City: Please contact the City's public works office
- Department of Fish and Game, Dispatch (707) 944-5512

## 39) How do I report an illegal discharge regarding pollutants being discharged ...

- ...into the bay, creeks, streams, drainage channels and other drainage facilities?
- ...into street right-of-way area that may result in downstream pollution?
- ... to impervious surfaces directly connected to streets and/or drainage facilities?
- ... to land that may result in pollution of drainage facilities?

### 40) How do I report complaint regarding a street sweeper?

Call the Public Works Department (925) 313-2000 and ask to speak to the Watershed Program staff person who handles the street sweeping program.

#### Please Note:

The street sweeper is not required to pick up large sized material that is dumped onto the street. The street sweeper's job is to do routine sweeping of curbs and gutters. The machines are not capable of picking up large amounts of dumped material. If this is the encountered, the operators have been instructed to go around it.

### 41) Where can I obtain a brochure or information on a stormwater quality issue?

- Most information can be obtained from the County Clean Water website at <a href="https://www.cccleanwater.org/residents/FAQ">www.cccleanwater.org/residents/FAQ</a> or <a href="https://www.cccrecycle.org">www.cccrecycle.org</a>
- Call the Public Works Department and ask to speak to the Watershed Program staff person who handles the street sweeping program.
- Both of these questions are answered on County Clean Water Program website at www.cccleanwater.org/resident/FAQ

### 42) Why is water from the faucet healthy for us, but toxic to aquatic life?

Chloramines used to disinfect drinking water are toxic to fish and amphibians at levels that are safe for human consumption.

MB:mb,gc,pd,hw,bb,mh,wb

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