

Thursday, April 21, 2005

Wastewater released into Mojave River

Plant officials report that 5.9 million gallons of sewage spilled; Oro Grande residents told there is no danger



Javier Ybarra / Special to the Daily Press

Orange County resident Jeff Jones wades across the Mojave River where a sign is posted warning of the estimated 5.9 million gallons of sewage that flowed into the river on the morning of April 12.

By GARY GEORGE/Staff Writer

ORO GRANDE — The wastewater treatment plant in Victorville is telling Oro Grande residents they are in no danger after a waste water spill of 5.9 million gallons went flowing down the Mojave River.

The Victor Valley Wastewater Reclamation Authority has said that on April 12 at about 5:45 a.m. one of the percolation ponds that handle approximately 6 million gallons a day of secondary effluent was accidentally overfilled and began flowing down to the river.

"The flow of water eroded the pond's earthen levee, washing it away. The entire contents of the pond flowed across Shay Road to the river," Dan Gallagher, general manager for VVWRA, said.

Last week residents began noticing signs along the river reading, "Contaminated water — 246-8638."

The flow of water heavily damaged the eastern shoulder of Shay Road, knocked down a portion of the temporary water line that conveys water to the California Bio Mass Regional Compost Facility and knocked down a portion of its fence line, Gallagher said.

Coliform levels in the river water were only slightly higher and are being regularly monitored, Gallagher said. Coliform is a bacteria found in the human digestive track.

"I'm telling residents who call that this is basically like a beach closure at the ocean. We posted it so people don't go wading and swimming," Gallagher said.

Gallagher said there is no danger to local water wells.

Valerie Hamm of Oro Grande, the closest resident to the reclamation plant, asked the plant to test her well water.

"They said for legal reasons they couldn't and suggested taking water samples to the County of San Bernardino Health Department," Hamm said.

"Being the closest resident, I would have liked more notice than a guy posting signs

in the river," Hamm said.

Gallagher said that the pond's system was calibrated for 0-3 feet of water depth and that the problem should never reoccur because the sensor has been fixed. The pond overflowed at five feet and took approximately a half hour to drain.

The secondary effluent that escaped was almost to the next cleaner level of tertiary water when it burst through the levee, Gallagher said.

"It's the same quality level of water that Los Angeles discharges into Santa Monica Bay every day," Gallagher said.

"It only smelled like a sewer the first day and right now the water is so deep I can't cross it with my quad," Mike Michaels, Oro Grande resident, said.

Gallagher said local residents will notice a heavier flow of water as the discharge to the river has been increased to offset the loss of capacity of the lost percolation pond.

Gary George may be reached at 951-6276 or ggeorge@vvdailypress.com