

MATTHEW THURLOW

A pair of boats cruise into Del's Boat Harbor on the Old River near Tracy. Developers of the new Mountain House project have obtained a state permit to dump treated waste water into the river near the harbor.

Water chiefs watch Delta dumping

Agencies push for tighter restrictions

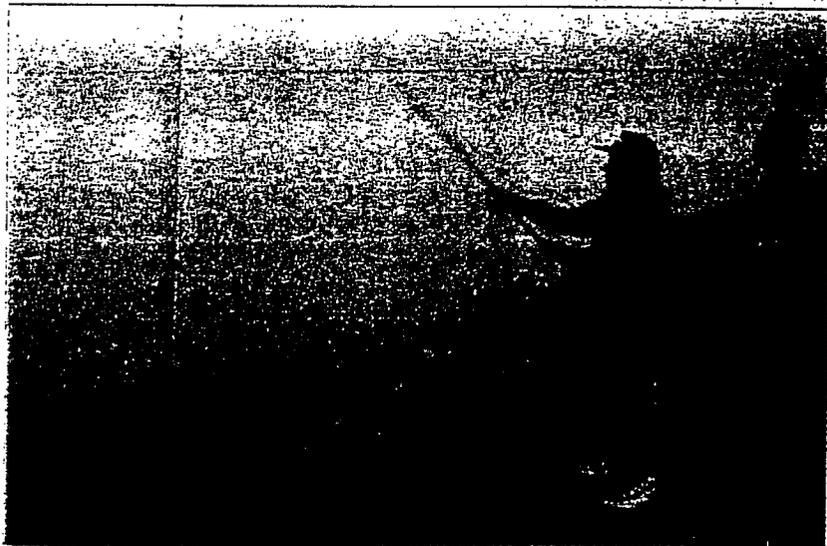
By Dennis J. Oliver
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WHILE STATE and federal officials wrangle over improving the quality of California's drinking water, fast-growing communities are planning to dump increasing amounts of treated sewage into the Delta that supplies it.

For that reason, water agency officials around the state are calling for blanket restrictions on waste water discharged into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, particularly into that part west of Tracy from which two-thirds of Californians draw their drinking water.

"It makes you scratch your head a little bit, doesn't it?" asked Al Donner, a spokesman for the Contra Costa County Water District, which has been especially vocal about the issue.

Sewage, agricultural drainage and industrial waste have long been a concern in California, where downstream residents quickly



Lynn Stafford of Oakland casts into the Clifton Court Forebay near Tracy. The forebay feeds into the Delta Mendota Canal, from which most Californians get their water.

learn that water at the bottom of the hill — or end of the line — isn't pristine, especially since upstream neighbors flush their toilets into it.

Now, huge residential developments planned in eastern Contra Costa and southern San Joaquin counties are poised to dump their

waste water just a stone's throw from the rivers and canals that supply drinking water to 22 million Californians.

The treated sewage from those developments could flow right into

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Water: Waste from Tracy near Delta

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ame part of the Delta that CALFED, a consortium of state and federal agencies, has targeted for water quality improvements. On Friday, CALFED recommended spending as much as \$4 billion the next five years to accomplish such a mission, among other goals. In September, the 43,000-resident Mountain House development northwest of Tracy obtained a state permit to dump its treated waste water into Old River, just a few miles upstream of intake pumps for the Delta Water Project and Central Valley Project systems.

Although the state will require the developer to strip the water of all organic contaminants, water agencies worry the waste water still would contain salt and other substances that complicate treat-

ment at least part of the year. The developer plans to use the waste water to irrigate farmland in Tracy.

City seeks increase

"This is an issue of concern," said Tim Quinn, deputy general manager of the Metropolitan Water District in Los Angeles, which delivers drinking water to 16 million Southern Californians.

Rather than dictate to Southern California cities how and where growth should occur, the Metropolitan Water District is setting guidelines to help reduce the impact of growth on Delta waterways.

In addition to the Mountain House project, the city of Tracy is to seek permission from the state to increase the amount of waste water it can dump into Old River, from 9 million to 15 million gallons a day. Under its present growth blueprint, the city's population could swell from about 44,000 to 160,000 residents by the mid-21st cen-

Tracy officials say they hope the state will allow them to expand the city's sewage treatment plant without requiring expensive new technologies to make the dumped water cleaner and safer.

"We don't want to put crystal-clear water out there if it's just going to be used on a hog farm downstream," said Steve Bailey, Tracy's deputy public works director. "What's the point?"

The Delta also would lie in the path of waste water from big developments planned in eastern Contra Costa County, including more than 3,000 homes already approved in Discovery Bay and Brentwood.

"These water quality issues are being given short shrift by the state regulators and are being completely ignored by some of the local jurisdictions," said Eric Parfrey, an environmental planner and community activist from Stockton. "It's crazy."

Taking control

The state Regional Water Quality Control officials who placed stringent controls on the Mountain House developer won't guarantee they will be as tough on other developments.

The regional water board has a policy of evaluating each discharge permit individually, said Tom Pinkos, assistant executive officer for the agency's Sacramento office.

"We're certainly getting the message that there are concerns regarding the quality of water, ending up in that part of the Delta," Pinkos said. "But there isn't just one blanket policy."

The regional water board is required to enforce the federal Clean Water Act, which regulates what can and cannot be discharged into the nation's waterways. But the federal Safe

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Drinking Water Act, which the Board does not consider when it issues permits, requires drinking water agencies to clean up what's been dumped before the water can legally be delivered to the tap.

The conflicting regulations are an example of "the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing," said Michael Carr, a New York-based public interest attorney with an office in San Francisco. He said he is considering legal action to compel state officials to take drinking water standards more seriously when licensing new or expanding waste water treatment plants.

"What you have here is one law that allows potentially harmful contaminants into the state's drinking water supply and another law that requires those same contaminants be removed before you can allow people to drink it," Carr said. "It would make more sense to keep these poisons out of the water supply in the first place."

Byron Buck, executive director of the California Urban Water Agencies, which represents the state's 12 largest drinking water providers, said the state agency should change its approach now that drinking water standards are becoming so stringent.

Need for change

"The state has got to start looking at these kinds of discharges differently," Buck said. CALFED is considering some measures that might help, such as reducing pollution elsewhere or installing flow barriers in the Delta to prevent poorly dilute sewage from reaching the pumps.

Jim Leonard, head of the Mountain House Community Services District, which will run the new waste water treatment plant on Old River, said his agency is being held to such a high standard by the state that the waste water it dumps into the river will actually improve water quality there.

"The quality of the treated water we would be putting into the Old River is a higher quality water than what is in the river when it gets to us," Leonard said. The development also plans to control the salt content of its waste water stream by regulating the amount of drainage.

Planning officials say advanced water conservation and treatment systems would also help.

Plans for two developments, recently approved in Tracy, for example, have waste water being used to irrigate parks, traffic median strips, golf courses and other public areas. Government buildings and large complexes would also be retrofitted with dual plumbing, in which one set of pipes carries highly treated water to the tap, while another carries waste water for use in yards or to flush toilets.

The Mountain House developer decided to scrap such measures because of costs, though.

"We have a whole new town being built where the developer thinks it's too expensive to put in double piping and to recycle water," said Margit Aramburu, executive director of the state Delta Protection Commission. "No one wants to voluntarily shoulder the extra cost."