



Stormwater

Background

State law requires local governments to participate in a complex regulatory system to minimize the pollution of regional watersheds by urban water runoff.

In 2013, the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board adopted new municipal stormwater permit standards that require permit-holders to implement new stormwater management practices for existing residential development. Local governments responsible for each watershed management area are required to submit a Water Quality Improvement Plan that outlines the specific steps they will take to comply with the new requirements.

Most of the proposals for existing residential development focus on public education, such as informational brochures distributed throughout the community, as well as voluntary incentive programs, such as irrigation replacement rebate programs. In some cases, however, cities have suggested they may require the implementation of retrofits to existing residential properties.

Chula Vista has committed to studying high-volume trash areas and determining whether it is possible to retrofit nearby storm drains to prevent the contamination of runoff. The City of San Diego has committed to studying potential residential retrofit projects, such as the disconnection of downspouts. On some buildings, rooftop rain gutters funnel into downspouts that lead directly into street gutters or underground storm drains. Downspout disconnection would require redirecting those downspouts so that the runoff is delivered to yards, gardens or rain barrels.

The City of San Diego is participating in a new “alternative compliance” process supported by builders and environmentalists with an emphasis on utilizing off-site mitigation options instead of creating on-site water basins, including retention ponds.

It is unclear whether local governments will implement retrofit mandates, or what exactly those mandates would look like. Other parts of the state may provide some clues. The Tahoe area, for example, already requires home sellers to disclose whether they have complied with local stormwater retrofit recommendations.

Analysis

Maintaining excellent water quality in regional watersheds is an important community goal. In addition to protecting and enhancing sensitive ecosystems, a healthy environment is also good for property values and the economy. There are an infinite number of ways to address water quality and fight pollution, and it is critical that government agencies choose strategies that maximize the positive environmental impact while minimizing the direct cost to homeowners in the community.

With so much of the land in the San Diego region already developed, it is likely inevitable that retrofitting existing public and private development will be part of the strategy. If this is the case, local governments must emphasize voluntary retrofits using public education and incentives, rather than mandatory retrofits that homeowners must pay themselves.

Point-of-sale retrofit mandates and point-of-sale disclosure requirements have the effect of reducing the accessibility of home ownership by increasing costs and making the sale of a home more difficult.

