



California Regional Water Quality Control Board

San Francisco Bay Region



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Arnold Schwarzenegger
Governor

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BASMAA Managers
c/o Geoff Brosseau
BASMAA Executive Director
1515 Clay Street,
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Subject: Use of Storm Drain Inlet Filters and Oil/Water Separators to Meet the Requirements of NPDES Municipal Stormwater Permits

Dear BASMAA Managers:

This letter responds to your requests to clarify the Water Board's review of an aspect of municipal stormwater permittee compliance with requirements to include treatment controls in new development and significant redevelopment projects. Please assist us in distribution of this letter to BASMAA member agencies and other interested parties.

The Board regularly receives inquiries regarding the inclusion of stormwater treatment control measures to remove pollutants from new development and redevelopment project runoff. As a state agency, the Board does not endorse specific treatment control products. Also, there is currently no State certification program that would certify the effectiveness of a particular product.

However, the Board's role does include determining permittees' compliance with their NPDES stormwater permits. This includes determining that municipalities have reduced the discharge of pollutants in storm water to the Maximum Extent Practicable (MEP). While not specifically defined within federal clean water law, MEP refers to implementing best management practices (BMPs) that are effective in addressing pollutants, generally accepted by the public, of reasonable cost, and technically feasible.

When reviewing compliance with permit requirements for new development and redevelopment projects, Board staff looks to see that permittees have required projects to incorporate appropriate source controls to prevent the discharge of pollutants, design measures to reduce impervious surface, and treatment controls to remove pollutants from runoff. We review whether these measures have been appropriately designed to be effective, given the existing state

of knowledge. For example, is a vegetated swale designed within parameters specified in existing literature as being effective? Such parameters include minimum residence times, maximum flow depths and velocities, limits on swale longitudinal and side slopes, inclusion of a subdrain if in very tight soils, and similar considerations.

Oil/Water Separators

Another example, vault-based oil-water separators, also known as water quality inlets, was originally designed for industrial use. These have been recognized to be generally ineffective at removing pollutants at concentrations seen in urban stormwater runoff, because removal rates are low and those pollutants that are removed are often flushed out by subsequent storms, especially when a separator is not frequently maintained. With the exception of projects where oil and grease concentrations are expected to be very high, and other controls are included in a “treatment train” approach, Board staff is unlikely to consider oil/water separators as a means of meeting the MEP standard.

Storm Drain Inlet Filters

Storm drain inlet filters, also known as drain inlet inserts, also have been shown to have limited effectiveness in removing pollutants from urban stormwater runoff, due to the nature of their design. Inlet filters are typically either bags or trays of filter media that are designed to catch and treat runoff as it enters the storm drain. They are manufactured stormwater treatment controls, and are typically popular because they have a low capital cost relative to other controls and can be placed into a traditional engineered storm drain design without altering that design.

In determining whether drain inlet filters meet the MEP standard, we reviewed the existing state of knowledge. Board staff’s assessment of studies and literature reviews for this class of controls has found the following:

- Filters are subject to clogging and/or blinding by sediment, trash, and vegetation, resulting in runoff bypassing the filter and/or flooding;
- Maintaining filter performance requires very frequent maintenance (as often as during and after every storm). Manufacturers in practice understate the maintenance requirements for this class of devices. In practice, maintenance is not completed at an effective frequency, particularly to avoid bypass of the filter element clogged with debris;
- Inlet filters, by virtue of their location below a storm drain grate, are out of sight. This can lead to reduced maintenance resulting from the filters being out-of-sight, and thus out-of-mind;
- Filter performance may decay rapidly over a time frame that is significantly shorter than typically recommended replacement or maintenance intervals;
- Filters appear to have very limited ability to remove dissolved pollutants, smaller particulates, and emulsified oil and grease, and may have a limited ability to remove

oil and grease as it is found in urban runoff. The filter element in inlet filters is small and easily bypassed if fouled to prevent flooding.

The limited space within a storm drain inlet appears to preclude highly effective treatment. To the extent that treatment is accomplished, it appears that these controls require an intensive maintenance regime—one that is expensive and which, based on our experience in the Bay Area, is ultimately not completed once the controls have been installed.

A list of references reviewed is attached and includes reports prepared by Bay Area municipal stormwater programs that found the effectiveness of existing inlet filter products to be very limited. Based on our review of these references and experience in the Bay Area, it would be very unlikely for a proposal using inlet filters as the sole treatment measures to meet the MEP standard.

Fortunately, there are a variety of effective controls available to project proponents and designers as alternatives to inlet inserts. These include a range of landscape-based controls (e.g., vegetated swales, bioretention areas, planter/tree boxes, ponds, and stormwater wetlands) and a series of manufactured controls (e.g., vault-based hydrodynamic separators, vault-based media filters, and other solids removal devices). With few exceptions, these controls appear to function more reliably to remove pollutants, and thus would better represent “MEP.”

Each type of BMP should be used in situations for which it is appropriate. For example, the City of Oakland is working to limit trash discharged into Lake Merritt. For that project, controls that primarily remove trash may be most appropriate. For most new development projects, however, BMPs that address the broad spectrum of urban runoff pollutants, from trash to fine particulates and soluble pollutants, are needed.

We recognize that inlet filter products with substantially improved performance may be developed in the future. Also, certification programs like Washington State’s “Evaluation of Emerging Stormwater Treatment Technologies,” which reviews technologies to determine whether they are at least as good as existing non-proprietary measures, may establish viable treatment measures. As with any aspect of the NPDES stormwater program, we anticipate that the municipal stormwater programs and the Board will continue to review information as it is developed so as to best determine what constitutes MEP, and to help ensure the reasonable cost in implementation of effective BMPs.

If you have any questions or further comments, please contact Dale Bowyer at (510) 622-2323 or via email to dcb@rb2.swrcb.ca.gov, or Keith Lichten via email to khl@rb2.swrcb.ca.gov, or at (510) 622-2380.

Sincerely,

--original signed by--

Bruce H. Wolfe
Executive Officer

Attachment: References Reviewed