

Barlow Effluent Taints Laguna

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For the second time in two years, an apple processing plant in Sebastopol must clean up a wastewater spill into Laguna de Santa Rosa that is threatening the pristine habitat.

Health officials say the spill from The Barlow Co. at 200 Morris St. does not pose a threat to the public. But there are reports of dead fish in a plume of effluent that spans roughly a quarter-mile, resulting from a release of wastewater to the storm drain that discharges to Zimpher Creek. The spill site is about a quarter-mile north of Highway 12 at the east entrance into town.

"We consider this to be serious," said Bob Tancreto, a supervisor for the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board in Santa Rosa.

The spill, discovered Tuesday, contains sugars and carbohydrates that depleted oxygen levels in the Laguna after mixing with bacteria in the water. It also turned the normally greenish water black and had a foul smell like rotten eggs, Tancreto said.

"It will certainly affect anything that lives off oxygen in the water, in this case fish and invertebrates," he said.

The water quality board has ordered the company to begin cleaning up the spill and is investi-

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gating whether to impose civil penalties, Tancreto said.

In the meantime, the company began taking measures Thursday to pump aerated water back into the Laguna and restore it to its natural balance.

Kendall-Jackson Winery lent the company four aerators and the city of Sebastopol, which owns most of Barlow's wastewater system, pitched in a large pump, said Mark Fitzgerald, plant manager for The Barlow Company.

The operation could take months, he said.

"We want to get it done and get it cleaned up as soon as possible to get it back to the way it was," said Fitzgerald, who oversees 80 people at the plant.

Health officials are hoping the Laguna will return to health after the operation is complete.

"As long as (the leak) is stopped and the effects are mitigated, it shouldn't have a long-term effect," Tancreto said.

The Barlow Co. avoided civil fines after a ruptured pipeline in September 1997 spewed thousands of gallons of effluent into the same area. The pipeline was replaced

after the break was discovered.

The most recent spill is believed to have originated from a small leak in a plug that separates a wastewater sump from a storm drain, said Fitzgerald. It is not known exactly how much wastewater emptied into the water. The spill was reported by a person who noticed it from the banks of the Laguna.

Fitzgerald said the leak has been fixed and the company is considering an overhaul of that section of the plant to prevent another leak in the future.

"It's our problem and we need to deal with it," he said.