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What's New on Vegas Wash Pollution

This summer will be another season of discontent in Las Vegas Bay of Lake Mead. Warm weather will bring out a new bloom of algae to befoul the water, slime up the beach and shores and then to rot. There will be no swimming and most bank fishermen probably won't be able to stand the stench long enough to wet a line.

Nothing has changed from last year except that conditions will be more deplorable. Every day 18 million gallons of effluent and runoff are freighting in nourishment for tons of new aquatic growth. Clark County and Las Vegas still use Lake Mead as a sewer. There even is good reason to doubt whether a major change to correct this situation will take place for several years.

Two months ago the League of Women Voters stated "We feel that no sewage effluent should be dumped into Lake Mead," a feeling shared by members of the Fish and Game Commission, boat owners, fishermen, conservationists and National Park Service people.

No one knows for sure how much of a permanent threat the algae growth is to Vegas Bay or to a larger section of the big Boulder Basin. It is known, however, that once the chain of growth and nourishment begins there is no simple expansion, there is compounded explosion. One drop of water yielded as much algae in 1967 as several gallons did in 1963.

This information comes from a summary by Nelson Williams, a Nevada Southern University professor during that period who made the tests for a biology class. The summary shows the geometric progression of the pollutants once they take hold.

April 1962 — Casual survey near the mouth of Vegas Wash indicated no pollution problem. Algae were not abundant enough to collect for class demonstration. Samples were taken from dock at Vegas Wash. A few species of green algae were collected from roughly 100 gallons of water. No indication of pollution.

March 1963 — Results of collections from dock in Vegas Wash were similar to results in 1962.

March 1964 — Collections in Vegas Wash yielded green, blue-green and red algae — indicative of nitrogen and phosphate presence. Several quarts of water yielded enough algae for class demonstration.

March 1965 — Collection from dock at Vegas Wash yielded more kinds of algae. Increase in blue-green algae would indicate phosphate increase. One quart of water yielded enough algae for class demonstration.

March 1966 — Collections from dock at Vegas Wash yielded mottle forms in addition to ones from previous year. Increase in nitrogen and phosphate. One soft drink bottle of water yielded an abundance of algae for class.



(Reproduced from Sweden NOW.)

April 1967 — Collections from dock at Vegas Wash yielded green pea soup of many kinds of algae. One dropper of water yielded as many algae as several gallons in 1962.

As important as the growth factor is, a more significant development is the presence of new forms of pond scum. Williams reported this changed from fresh water to polluted water algae.

Public health authorities also monitor the wash. Their concern is not with esthetics or recreation values. They are watching for contaminants, and report the water is safe.

Whether it will remain safe may become a serious question because the county sanitation district plant is running at maximum capacity now, and there are no plans for expansion before 1971. When there is rain the plant cannot cycle the increased liquid through the full primary and secondary treatments, and the only partially treated effluent is sent down the

By Bill Vincent

wash to the lake because there is no other way to handle it.

Pathologist Thorne J. Butler, who has been running laboratory tests on effluent, reports that sometimes there is no bacteria present and sometimes there is a lot. It depends on the monitoring by the county, and the chlorination and load amounts at certain times. He found large amounts of phosphate, one source of algae nourishment, present in the effluent from the plants of the county and Las Vegas. This phosphate would have to be reduced 99.6 percent to restore Vegas Wash discharge to a standard acceptable to Lake Mead.

As bad as the situation is now, it is going to get a lot worse. Not only is the county delaying new facilities for four years, but the newly formed Inter-Agency Water Pollution Control Task Force may well be disposed to move much slower than the rate of pollution.

Members of the task force are Clark County, Clark County Sanitation District No. 2, Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, Basic Management, Inc., Nevada Power Company, Boulder City, Las Vegas Valley Water District and

the Colorado River Commission. Most of the members are the very source of the pollution, and they will have to provide the substantial amounts of money — the Federal government will supply the rest — for the solution. Such appropriations will be difficult unless here is a marked improvement in the budgets, or strong public pressure.

The Inter-Agency Water Pollution Control Task Force grew out of an informal "shirt sleeve" committee which had been meeting, with no tangible results, for months. In February, possibly unaware of the "shirt sleeve" group, Gov. Laxalt appointed a Lake Mead Task Force with representatives from the cities, the county, the district health department and the Colorado River Commission.

Some local entities looked upon the governor's task force as an unwelcome intrusion of the state into local affairs. So the "shirt sleeve" committee was reconstituted as an inter-agency task force to function as a technical committee of the Clark County Regional Planning Council, and the governor was requested to appoint the chief of the state bureau of environmental health and the state engineer as advisory members. Laxalt's task force died. The county, Las Vegas, North Las Vegas and Henderson have approved the memorandum of understanding establishing the task force, agreeing to provide money for an engineering survey of "immediate and long-term remedial programs to reduce or eliminate the Lake Mead pollution." It will be December before the engineering report is ready.

Water is our most valuable resource. Effluent, if handled intelligently, becomes a part of these liquid assets instead of a dangerous liability. All of the effluent would be utilized during the summer months if, in addition to agriculture and industry, it was used for public parks and golf courses in place of ground water. Other facilities or treatment will be necessary to handle the surplus of the winter months. All of this, of course, will be the object of the engineering study.

The future of Las Vegas Bay, and possibly even of Boulder Basin depends on how rapidly the local governments meet their public responsibility by carrying out the recommendations of the engineer.

Unless, of course, the Department of Interior decides the situation is intolerable and steps in with an order prohibiting any discharge into Lake Mead after a certain date.