

S.F. Airport cited again for releasing waste to bay

By Aaron Davis
Mercury News
February 12, 2002

San Francisco International Airport dumped wastewater with elevated levels of cyanide into San Francisco Bay in December, the 82nd time since 1996 it has violated water pollution rules, state officials said Monday.

State water regulators say the latest incident didn't cause much harm to the bay but showed once again that the airport hasn't come up with a plan to fix its troubled wastewater system. That plan is due in three weeks, but airport spokesman Ron Wilson said that with a \$100 million deficit, the airport can't afford to do an upgrade anytime soon.

"It would have been bad if a fish was swimming by, but it wasn't the problem for more than a day," Wil Bruhns, a senior engineer for the water board, said of the Dec. 3 dumping of cyanide-tainted water.

The bigger problem with the spill, he said, was that it showed the airport still can't control its Clean Water Act violations.

"These violations have been going on for a long time, and we want to see them stopped," Bruhns told the Mercury News. "It's not the worst treatment plant in the Bay Area, but it's certainly not the best."

The December spill is one of eight cyanide violations involving the airport's treatment plant in recent years.

The chemical is a byproduct of the treatment process said San Francisco Airport spokesman Ron Wilson. Airport officials are plotting how to add a water clarifier to the tertiary water treatment plant that will filter out such poisons, he said.

The airport's plant treats an average of 1 million gallons of wastewater a day. As with other sewage treatment plants around the bay, it releases the treated water back into the bay. For comparison, San Jose's treatment plant releases 120 million gallons into the bay each day.

Environmentalists say the budget shortfall is no excuse for failing to upgrade the treatment plant and that the airport isn't spending wisely the money it does have. They argue the airport should spend no money researching a proposed runway expansion and other projects while its water system needs repair.

"They are in violation of the law for polluting the bay. That's the bottom line," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, a group formed to stop bay fill projects.

Lewis said the recent violation was as serious as any of the others the airport has received because cyanide can kill fish.

On Dec. 3, the cyanide level in the plant's effluent reached a level of 16.53 micrograms per liter. The state limit is 10 micrograms per liter.

That violation brings a mandatory \$3,000 fine, which will be added to undetermined fines for the 81 other violations. The airport has not been fined for any water quality violations since 1995. Bruhns said the board will levy a single big fine against the airport this spring.

The airport regularly tests the quality of its effluent and places black minnows and other types of small fish into the discharge to make sure they do not die, Wilson said.