

**“Ballona Creek's 'Sea Curtain' has produced net gains”**



BRAD GRAVERSON/DAILY BREEZE

A thick layer of trash bobbed in Ballona Creek, held back by a bright yellow net that forms the only barrier between the creek channel and the ocean. A work crew from the county's Department of Public Works pulled on hip boots, then waded into the rubbish.

Greg Sarpy, a department superintendent, watched as two crewmen used pitchforks to fling plastic bottles, plastic foam cups, mylar birthday balloons, toy balls, an empty purse, a dead bird and more onto the cement banks of Ballona Creek. Two more crew members raked the debris into 55-gallon garbage cans, hauling 15 loads into a nearby truck before the area near the net was cleaned.

It was a Monday, and a light day for trash in the creek, crew members said. Considerably more trash routinely backs up at the net after every winter storm.

"Without the net, this would all end up polluting the beach," Sarpy commented.

The county's beaches and coastal waters are threatened by pollution from more than one source. Sewage spills are a recurring problem, as South Bay residents were reminded a week ago when 2 million gallons of raw sewage spilled onto Manhattan Beach, closing the shoreline from the Palos Verdes Peninsula to El Segundo.

But trash cascading down the county's independent system of storm drains and waterways during heavy rains also sullies the sand -- and would do so more often if not for the net.

The nylon rope net was put in place more than 10 years ago by the Department of Public Works. At an annual cost of about \$75,000, it stops 12 to 25 tons of trash from reaching the ocean each year, said Patricia Condon, a spokeswoman for the county's anti-pollution campaign.

A buoyant plastic "Sea Curtain," made by a Torrance company (Kepner Plastics), holds up the net and stretches 335 feet across the creek, near where Culver Boulevard passes over Lincoln Boulevard at the border of Playa del Rey and Marina del Rey.

The net is one of many steps the county takes to help keep local beaches and Santa Monica Bay free of trash, said Jeff Valles, who has been supervisor of the Ballona net project for three years.

Another is the Long Beach trash boom at the end of the Los Angeles River, where a metal screen catches roughly 200 tons of rubbish per year.

One recent storm swept 75 tons of trash -- including televisions, furniture and street signs -- into the screen, where workers using a crane spent the better part of a week cleaning it up.

"The problem is, people keep dumping their trash," Valles said. "They think the storm drains go to a treatment plant, but that's not the case. They flow straight to the ocean."

"But you can tell a big difference since the net was installed," he added. "The beaches are a lot cleaner now."

Still, despite nearly 10 years of county-sponsored anti-littering campaigns, the amount of trash floating down the waterway hasn't decreased, several public works employees say.

"The amount of trash year-to-year is the same, but we're seeing different trash," Valles said. "The industrial trash (problem) has gotten better. I think a lot of the trash now comes from the public."

In the dry summer months, trash collects on the sides of roads and in storm drains, Valles explained. Then, during the winter storm season -- October to April -- rain washes it from gutters into storm drains and onward to Ballona Creek and other waterways, where it gets caught in the screens and nets, he said.



## **Small things escape**

Small objects and liquids such as oil or paint flow through and into the ocean. But plenty of other stuff gets caught.

At the Ballona Creek net, county workers find mostly plastic bottles and plastic foam cups, but also sofa cushions, syringes, trash cans and tires. Environmentally hazardous motor oil containers, spray-paint cans and computer components are other frequent finds.

Also getting caught in the net are milk cartons, rotting fruit, beer and soda cans, plywood, plants, dead animals -- "Almost anything and everything that can float," Valles said.

Bulky items such as shopping carts, car parts and construction materials are usually spotted upstream and pulled out before they can reach the net, where they sometimes rip through it, Sarpy noted.

To prevent flooding, the net is designed to burst in a heavy rain, as it did during a storm over the New Year's weekend. Officials can't be sure how much trash rushed into the ocean when the net split open Jan. 2.

Mark Gold, executive director of the environmental group Heal the Bay, said the net generally does an admirable job of keeping trash off the beaches, but fails to help clean the creek.

"It's literally the safety net," Gold said. It would be more effective -- if more expensive -- for the county to tackle the problem at the mouth of the storm drains, where the trash first enters the water system, he said.

By inserting filtering mechanisms near the curbside entrance to the storm drains, the county could trap garbage before it can travel downstream, he explained.

That's a goal the county is already making progress on, said public works spokesman Kerjon Lee.

Although Heal the Bay recently gave failing grades to several polluted beaches in the Los Angeles region, the grades were for bacterial pollution, not trash. The bacteria comes from fertilizers that people use on their lawns, animal waste that pet owners don't pick up and other sources that are small enough to slip through the net, Gold said.

"It's a lot more difficult to keep the bacteria out of the water than to keep the trash out, but for both of them the public is a big part of the solution," Gold said.

"We shouldn't be throwing trash in the streets and we should be picking up after our pets, and those are two things that would really help."

## **Educating the public**

Condon, of the county anti-pollution campaign, and the Department of Public works agree, and have integrated such ideas into the agency's public education campaign. But until people learn to keep everything but water out of the storm drains, trash will continue to pollute the creek, Condon said.

"We need to make people more aware, and it's only when that happens that we'll see a significant difference," Condon said. "People don't realize that just washing their car in the driveway sends soap into the ocean. ..."

"If you don't want to end up swimming alongside the trash you're thinking of dumping, then you have to throw it away properly."

## **Source:**

Barrier has reduced flow of Los Angeles trash to the ocean and the beaches

By Alison Shackelford Hewitt

Copley News Service