



## **FIRST RAIN SWAMPS LOCAL OCEANS WITH POLLUTION**

*Runoff from Southland's massive summer wildfires poses additional hazard*

SANTA MONICA, CA (Tuesday, October 13, 2009) – Heal the Bay today warned Southland residents and visitors to avoid water contact at Los Angeles County beaches for 72 hours, following the area's first significant rainfall after the recent Station wildfires and a record drought period.

The county's 2,800-mile storm drain system is designed to channel rainwater to the ocean to prevent local flooding. But it also has the unintended function of moving pollution directly into the Santa Monica and San Pedro bays following rainstorms.

After heavy rains, more than 70 major outfalls spew manmade debris, animal waste, pesticides, automotive fluids and human-gastrointestinal viruses into the marine ecosystem. This pollution poses human health risks, harms marine life and dampens the tourist economy by littering shorelines.

After the recent mountain brush fires in Los Angeles County, including the massive Station Fire in the San Gabriel Mountains, a large amount of pollution will be washed into receiving waters and storm drains during this first flush event. The recent fires scorched vegetation that once helped to filter and stabilize the pollutants.

Debris and toxins that have been accumulating for months on sidewalks, roadways and riverbeds and are now being washed into the storm drains. Exposure to this runoff can cause a variety of illnesses, most frequently stomach flu.

During dry months, Heal the Bay and county health officials urge swimmers to stay 100 yards from flowing storm drains, which have been shown to have elevated levels of known carcinogens and pathogens. Experts agree after a major rainfall that local beachgoers should stay out of the water entirely for at least 72 hours.

“Our region's waterbodies are likely to see unparalleled pollution levels after this rain event due to the recent brush fires and drought conditions,” said Kirsten James, Heal the Bay's director of water quality. “It is critical that swimmers are aware of this risk and stay out of the water.”

Local residents contribute to debris buildup by dropping nearly 1 million cigarette butts on the ground each month, according to L.A. County Department of Public Works estimates. Citizens walk a dog without picking up the droppings more than 82,000 times per month, and they hose off driveways and sidewalks into storm drains more than 415,000 times each month.

During the rainy season, Heal the Bay reminds residents that they can take steps in their own home to take pressure off an already taxed storm drain system. Among them: keep trash out of gutters and storm drains, dispose of animal waste and automotive fluids properly, and avoid overwatering lawns and plants. (Visit <http://www.healthebay.org/waystoheal> for more tips.)

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To access images of storm-drain debris please visit <http://www.flickr.com/photos/healthebay>

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**About Heal the Bay**

Heal the Bay is a nonprofit environmental organization dedicated to making Southern California coastal waters and watersheds, including Santa Monica Bay, safe, healthy and clean. We use research, education, community action and advocacy to pursue our mission.