

The article below “State assessing contaminated water infiltration to Scotia drinking water” was published in the Eureka Times-Standard on August 1, 2015 by Will Houston.

Humboldt Redwood Company found a number of comments that would benefit from additional correction, clarification or commentary which are presented on the right side of the page in green italics.

Text of Article

Text of article begins below, spaces placed to allow facts to line up with text of article.

Facts about Humboldt Redwood Company



The Humboldt Redwood Company sawmill in Scotia sits just east of the Eel River on Saturday.
Shaun Walker — The Times-Standard

State agencies are currently assessing potential impacts to Scotia’s drinking water system after three separate incidents at the Humboldt Redwood Company sawmill caused water contaminated with woody materials to infiltrate into the town’s drinking water system on the Eel River.

Other than an unpalatable taste, odor and a slight golden tinge, Scotia’s drinking water was never deemed unsafe to drink, Town of Scotia Company President Frank Bacik said, though the woody resin has required an entire cleansing of the utility company’s water system and has resulted in some issues with residential appliances. Since the last incident occurred on July 20, Bacik and state agencies said on Friday that the drinking water is returning to its normal quality.

“The worst is behind us and the discharge has

The Town of Scotia (TOS) has a very old water system in the midst of being upgraded. As with any system this age undergoing repairs and maintenance, there will be some challenges. Humboldt Redwood Company (HRC) has been working collaboratively with TOS and regulators to assess the cause of the TOS water problem. It is premature to draw any conclusion or point to an individual event as the specific cause of the TOS water problem.

There are many components to managing water quality. TOS draws water to the system from the Eel River which is suffering very low flow due to the drought conditions. At this time it remains unclear if events occurring on HRC property had any impact on the TOS water problem.

<p>stopped,” Bacik said.</p> <p>The State Water Resources Control Board and its North Coast Regional Water Quality Control are currently working to find out how much of the drinking water intake system was contaminated by the unintended runoff water and how such an incident can be prevented in the future.</p> <p>“This is a serious issue with water quality and public health and our staff is working on it diligently,” said Mona Dougherty, senior water resource control engineer for the North Coast Water Quality Control Board.</p> <p>The multi-part incident began on the night of June 27 when a wood waste pile at the Humboldt Redwood Company (HRC) sawmill caught fire. After local fire departments controlled the blaze, Bacik said HRC staff continued to douse the pile throughout the next day, using about 2 million gallons of water to do so.</p> <p>While the runoff from this water would normally go to the sawmill’s stormwater retention pond as is required under its industrial stormwater permit, an unknown amount of runoff went into a storm drain on HRC’s property.</p> <p>The woody water was later found to be discharging from a hidden culvert above a gravel bar of the nearby Eel River where Town of Scotia draws its water supply from.</p> <p>As to how this occurred, Dougherty said that there were some violations of HRC’s industrial stormwater permit and gaps in the company’s required stormwater pollution prevention plan.</p>	<p><i>It remains uncertain if any activities at the HRC operation impacted the TOS water problem. No Water Quality Agency has informed HRC that it considers HRC responsible for the TOS water problem. The bark pile fire on June 27 was doused with water, as is the common practice. HRC notified the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (NC RWQCB) of the incident. A discharge of fire suppression water is authorized under HRC’s Industrial General Permit.</i></p> <p><i>HRC agrees that water quality is a significant issue and HRC has been working collaboratively with TOS and regulators to assess the cause of the TOS water problem.</i></p> <p><i>There was a fire on HRC property on June 27, 2015. The fire was the result of spontaneous combustion. It is difficult to estimate the precise amount of water used on the fire, but given the information HRC has, it believes it was significantly less than 2 million gallons.</i></p> <p><i>The runoff may or may not have exited through a culvert, known to TOS but not to HRC, which has been in place for many, many years. The TOS water problem began more than a week following this fire and, given the number and complexities of variables, it is impossible to know if water reached the culvert, subsequently reaching the TOS water system and thereby caused the concerns with water quality reported to TOS by citizens in the community.</i></p> <p><i>The TOS storm drain and water systems run throughout the town and the adjacent industrial facilities. The responsibility for permitting and maintaining these systems is currently under review as TOS finalizes the process of converting to a Community Services District (CSD). It is</i></p>
--	---

“Some of the storm drain facilities were not properly put into the plan and they didn’t fully understand how their storm drain system works,” she said. “That’s something they’ll need to address.”

As a result of this discharge, water laden with wood lignins and tannins poured out of the unknown culvert on the gravel bar a few hundred feet upstream of the town’s drinking water collection pipes, which are buried underneath the gravel.

A few days later around July 4, residents began noticing a discoloration of their water and called for more chlorination to deal with the issue. Meanwhile, Town of Scotia staff began testing the water and found that the wood lignins and tannins from the wood waste pile fire, along with safe but elevated levels of iron and manganese had been sucked into the drinking water system and were causing some issues and “odd patterns” around town.

“The wood resins are devilish,” Bacik said. “They can clog filters, they can get past the activated charcoal, get in the pipes and linger there.”

Millions of gallons of water in the storage tanks and pipes had to be flushed out and the gravel bar was altered and flushed out to prevent more contamination. HRC began scraping off and hauling away the contaminated deposits from the effected gravel bar. State water agencies were also contacted.

premature to draw any conclusions about responsibility for permitting the complicated infrastructure.

No regulatory agency has advised HRC of an alleged violation or of gaps in its Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP). HRC was not aware of the existence of the outfall and has still been unable to confirm all potential inputs into this particular underground stormwater system. HRC is working with its consultants to update the SWPPP as required under California’s new IGP, which came into effect July of this year.

The runoff may or may not have exited through a culvert, known to TOS but not to HRC, in place for many, many years. TOS water problem began more than a week following this fire and it is impossible to know if water reached the culvert and subsequently reached the TOS water system.

In collaborating with TOS and regulators HRC did embark on precautionary efforts, including the removal of sand and gravel around culverts and storm drains. Until TOS has resolved their water problem HRC will continue to work collaboratively with TOS and regulators. In the meantime, HRC is providing drinking water to employees throughout its facility.

Then came what Bacik described as “a comedy of errors” when HRC’s fire suppression system had two water main breaks with the first occurring a week after the initial fire.

“We’d do all this work to get it clear and then there’d be another spill,” Bacik said. “We’ve never had these discharges into the river before, so coping with them has been our greatest concern.”

More water poured on to the gravel bar from the same culvert, which led to HRC finding out about the discharge site, engineering geologist Devon Jorgenson of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board said.

“They were unaware of the culvert’s existence until after the first main break,” she said.

Once again, the utility company had to begin testing and cleaning out the tannins and lignins that infiltrated its water system. But on July 20 at 5 a.m., a second HRC main break occurred, causing another slug of contaminated water to spill out.

But this time, Bacik said, they were prepared and were able to shut off their water intake system as well as the water main in order to minimize any impacts to the drinking water system. Town of Scotia also borrowed portable water storage tanks to be used while they flushed their system again.

Now two weeks later, Bacik said the Town of Scotia Company is continuing to chase down and flush out any possible contaminations from their drinking water system and has already spent “tens of thousands of dollars” on rush water testing, equipment rentals and the previous cleanups.

“We work all day everyday on the problem and

TOS has a very old water system in the midst of being upgraded. As with any system this age undergoing repairs and maintenance, there will be some challenges. During this period there were a number of breaks in the fire suppression system that protects the entire town, the power plant and the mill. Two of those breaks occurred in pipes that happened to be on HRC property.

TOS employees made HRC aware of their drinking water concern on July 6th, and the existence of the culvert on July 7th, HRC immediately initiated an investigation (July 6th) and immediately informed the NC RWQCB (July 7th).

HRC was unaware of the outfall -- no issue had ever arisen since HRC had acquired the property. The drain was hidden in brush and HRC had not been advised of its existence.

It is unclear if any water from suppressing the bark fire or from the ruptured water lines reached a culvert. It is further unclear the source of any water that may have reached the culvert because many of the storm drains around town are interconnected.

Furthermore, at this time it can only be speculated that water released from the culvert would reach and impact the TOS intake system which is thought to be approximately 200 feet from the discharge location and at a depth estimated at 10 feet.

spared no expense,” Bacik said. “It is frustrating when you can’t turn a dial and solve the problem.”

Meanwhile, Dougherty said HRC has hired independent water quality testers and are working with state water officials to address any issues with stormwater retention. As to whether penalties or fees would be assessed as a result of these incidents, she said, “that decision hasn’t been made yet.”

HRC has, in fact, retained water quality experts to assist in our collaboration with TOS and regulators as they evaluate the potential cause(s) of the TOS water problem. It is premature to speculate on the nature or cause of the TOS water problem.

Safe and high quality drinking water for the citizens of Scotia, and HRC employees is of paramount importance to HRC. HRC will continue to collaborate and provide assistance to TOS and the NC RWQCB.