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A Proposal to Keep Sewage Away From the California Coast

By *FELICITY BARRINGER*

The federal Environmental Protection Agency said Wednesday that it intended to ban all dumping of sewage by large cargo and cruise ships in California waters out to the three-mile limit. The state has been requesting the ban for five years.

California has long banned the dumping of untreated sewage, and international rules prohibit the largest ships from discharging untreated waste within three miles of the coastline. But, according to figures provided by the state's Environmental Protection Agency, only about a third of California's waters are covered by a state ban on any sewage discharge. If the proposed federal waiver is completed, even treated sewage cannot be dumped anywhere within the 5,222 square miles of California waters. More than 90 percent of the treated sewage that is dumped comes from cruise ships.

Jared Blumenfeld, the Southwestern regional administrator for the federal E.P.A., equated California's push to ban all marine sewage discharge from large vessels to the state's cutting-edge efforts to control greenhouse gases.

"California is leading the way," he said. "They are setting the pace for the rest of the nation."

Even under the most current international regulations, Mr. Blumenfeld said, "They still allow you to discharge some level of treated sewage within three miles." The proposed regulation, he said, does not.

Once the decision is finalized (federal procedures require a 60-day comment period and time for the government to respond), environmental officials say, the ban will prevent about 20 million gallons of treated sewage from being discharged in state waters, out of an estimated 25 million gallons dumped each year. Currently, it is illegal to dump any kind of sewage in nine areas of coastal waters, including four major marine reserves. But large areas remain open to dumping of treated waste, including most of the waters in and around San Francisco Bay, with the exception of Richardson Bay off Sausalito.

According to data provided by Lindsay VanLaningham, a spokeswoman for the California E.P.A., the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach together served about 1.2 million cruise ship passengers in 2009 and received calls from about 10,000 cargo ships. San Diego

served around 800,000 cruise ship passengers in 2009, and San Francisco, 150,000. The Port of Oakland received nearly 2,000 visits from cargo vessels.

Jon D. Haveman, founding principal of the research firm [Beacon Economics](#), said that in the same year, \$255 billion worth of waterborne trade went through California ports.

Mr. Blumefeld, the regional director of the federal E.P.A., said that while large cargo ships carry far fewer people than cruise ships — perhaps 20, compared with hundreds — there are about 10 to 15 cruise ships that regularly sail the state's coast, while thousands of cargo ships dock at the state's ports. He said the merchant shippers had sought an exemption for vessels that could store no more than five days' worth of effluent, to allow such ships to make the more time-consuming journeys into the state's delta region, to the inland ports of Sacramento and Stockton.

In a compromise, he said, the proposed rule exempts vessels that can store no more than two days' worth of effluent.

Representatives of trade associations for the cruise and merchant shipping industries did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 25, 2010

An earlier version of this post misspelled the surname of Jared Blumenfeld as Blumenthal.