



Flood Control
& Water Conservation District

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
For

**Drainage, Watershed, and
Water Quality**

Last Revised May 4, 2020

Introduction:

The following questions have been organized in the categories below. We have attempted to group the questions from more general to more specific/technical in nature. Each group of questions is in a different file. You should go to the file that appears to relate best to your question.

Frequently Asked Questions for:

- [Drainage, Watershed, and Water Quality](#)
- [Property Owners Near Creeks](#)
- [Developers and Engineers](#)
- [Definitions of Terms](#)

If you have questions that you cannot find in this document, please call the Flood Control District at (925) 313-2000 and ask for the Flood Control. Someone will do their best to address your question.

Contra Costa County Flood Control &
Water Conservation District¹
255 Glacier Drive
Martinez, CA 94553
Phone: (925) 313-2000
FAX: (925) 313-2333
www.cccounty.us/floodcontrol

Maintenance Division:
Phone: (925) 313-7000
FAX: (925) 313-7014

¹ The Flood Control District is in the County Public Works Building

List of Questions

	Page
Introduction	2
<i>GENERAL DRAINAGE QUESTIONS</i>	5
1) Who maintains the creek, channel, or drainage pipe?	5
2) Who owns and maintains the drainage pipe that crosses my property?	5
3) A drainage inlet or pipe is clogged, a tree has fallen into the creek, or my neighbor has affected the drainage on my property; who do I call?.....	6
4) Will Flood Control remove fallen trees?.....	6
5) Why don't you maintain the creek like a park with mowing, landscaping, pruning, etc? Why don't you use public funds to actively maintain the creek like funding is used for active park maintenance?	6
6) There is a homeless encampment in the Flood Control right-of-way. OR.....	7
7) There are kids playing in District property and making lots of noise	7
8) Why don't you remove debris jams during storms?.....	7
9) Who do I contact about FEMA floodplain issues?	7
10) Who do I contact to obtain rainfall data?	7
11) What was the return period for the storm the other day?.....	7
12) What is a Flood Control Zone (FCZ)?	8
13) What is a Drainage Area (DA)?	8
14) I am a lawyer and need information from your files. Can you get that information for me? Does it cost anything? Can you analyze it for me?.....	9
15) What kind of facilities does Flood Control District design?	9
16) I'm not a big developer and not an engineer. Can Flood Control design my drainage system for me?.....	9
<i>WATERSHED QUESTIONS</i>	10
17) What is a watershed and how do I affect it?.....	10
18) Who do I contact to get more involved in what's happening in the watersheds in Contra Costa County?	10
19) I saw someone discharge wastewater in a large quantity, dump debris, or construct a permanent fixture on a creek bank. I am not sure if this activity is permitted. Who should I call?	10
20) I want to volunteer for creek cleanup activities. Where can I get information on where these activities are held?	10

21)	I want to know where creeks are located in the County. Where can I obtain a map?	11
22)	Who do I call to get involved in volunteer water quality monitoring?.....	11
23)	I am a teacher and I want to find out about environmental programs I can get my students involved in. Who do I contact?	11
24)	How can I find out about classes, workshops, and seminars on stormwater quality issues?.....	11
25)	What can I do to improve the environment of the watershed in my community? 11	
<i>WATER QUALITY QUESTIONS</i>		<i>12</i>
26)	Is there a difference between the storm drain and sewer system?	12
27)	What is E-waste and how do I properly dispose of it?	12
28)	How do I dispose of my mercury thermometers?.....	12
29)	The creek near my house is polluted. What can be done about it?.....	12
30)	Why should I recycle used motor oil?	13
31)	There's oil in the street in front of my house. What should I do about it?	13
32)	Can I drain my pool into the storm drain?.....	13
33)	Leaves and yard clippings are organic. Why can't I put them down the storm drain?.....	13
34)	If I can't dump leftover chemicals into the sanitary sewer, what can I do with them?	13
35)	Why shouldn't I wash my car at home; I use biodegradable soap?	14
36)	It's OK to rinse my paint supplies out in the gutter, right?	14
37)	What am I supposed to do with my dirty mop water; I don't want to dump it in my clean sink.....	14
38)	Who do I contact to report illegal dumping into creeks and drainage courses or other water bodies?	14
39)	How do I report a complaint regarding a street sweeper?	14
40)	Where can I obtain a brochure or information on a stormwater quality issue?...15	
41)	Why is water from the faucet healthy for us, but toxic to aquatic life?.....	15

GENERAL DRAINAGE QUESTIONS

1) Who maintains the creek, channel, or drainage pipe?

Typically, the Contra Costa County Public Works Department maintains unincorporated county public drainage facilities, such as roadway cross culverts, roadside ditches, and storm drains within a public right-of-way or easements accepted for maintenance. Cities maintain the same types of facilities in their own jurisdictions.

The Flood Control District maintains facilities in their rights-of-way and easements. This includes large improved drainage channels, detention basins, and dams that serve as regional drainage facilities. The Flood Control District also maintains properties it owns that do not have drainage facilities on them. Many of these properties are either remainders from completed projects or planned for future drainage projects.

The Flood Control District or County will maintain a creek if they have fee title to the creek or have some other property right, such as an easement.

Most creeks in Contra Costa County are privately owned and property owners are responsible for maintaining natural creeks and other types of drainage facilities (storm drain pipes, concrete or earthen ditches) on private property and private roads. Private owners are also responsible for maintaining driveway culverts even if in the public road right-of-way. You should check with your City on this issue if your property is within the City Limit.

2) Who owns and maintains the drainage pipe that crosses my property?

A drainage pipe or ditch may cross private property and be inside a County or private drainage easement. There are restrictions on what property owners can and can't do on the land within such easements. In general, in the unincorporated area, no permanent structures can be built within an easement and no alterations can be made to the pipe or ditch without a permit from the County.

You can find information about a drainage easement on your property in your title report or in public records. Copies of the Assessors Maps and other land documents are available at the Public Works Department at 255 Glacier Drive in Martinez [phone (925) 313-2000]. The County does not automatically accept drainage easements that are dedicated to the County. If the pipe within the dedicated easement needs to be cleaned out or repaired, the County will generally not perform the required maintenance unless easements are accepted by the County for drainage maintenance.

Private drainage easements have similar restrictions, and maintenance of the drainage facility in the easement would be done by the property owner or the owner of the easement. However, each situation is unique and requires research to determine who is responsible for maintaining the facility.

- 3) A drainage inlet or pipe is clogged, a tree has fallen into the creek, or my neighbor has affected the drainage on my property; who do I call?

If the drainage facility is located on private property and not within a public right-of-way, the homeowner is responsible for correcting the problem. In an emergency, if an obstruction is blocking flows within a creek with the potential of flooding three or more homes, the County may assist with removal if resources are available.

If the drainage facility is publicly owned and maintained, call the appropriate number below for assistance.

Drainage Facility located in unincorporated County
County Maintenance Division, (925) 313-7000

Flood Control District² Facility in Flood Control District Right-of-Way:
County Public Works/Flood Control District, (925) 313-2000

Facility located in City:
Please contact your City's public works office.

- 4) Will Flood Control remove fallen trees?

Generally, the Flood Control District will only remove fallen trees within the limits of Flood Control rights-of-way and easements where Flood Control facilities have been constructed. Flood Control may remove fallen trees from privately-owned reaches of major creeks in the Walnut Creek watershed as funds are available. Such tree removal is performed only to the extent necessary to assure that the material will not float downstream and become a flow obstruction. As maintenance policy, wood from tree removal is left onsite, above the creek bank and away from high flows that might carry it away.

- 5) Why don't you maintain the creek like a park with mowing, landscaping, pruning, etc? Why don't you use public funds to actively maintain the creek like funding is used for active park maintenance?

Due to restricted funding, the Flood Control District provides only the maintenance necessary to ensure the function of the creek/channel as a storm drainage or flood control system. The systems Flood Control maintains are only in Flood Control right-of-way.

The County maintains the function of storm drain pipes, roadside ditches within County Road right-of-way, and public bridge crossings where debris might collect.

The Flood Control District and County do not perform maintenance on creeks/channels that are privately owned due to land right, liability, and other legal reasons. General Plan policies and State and Federal Environmental Regulations also limit maintenance activities.

²The Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (Flood Control District) is staffed by Contra Costa County Public Works Department employees and its office is at the same location as the Public Works Department

- 6) There is a homeless encampment in the Flood Control right-of-way. OR
- 7) There are kids playing in District property and making lots of noise.

For specific help on homeless encampments or illegal use of District right-of-way, contact our Maintenance office at (925) 313-7000. After hours or if there is an immediate threat or emergency, call 911.

- 8) Why don't you remove debris jams during storms?

From a practical point of view, the Flood Control District does not place the lives of its employees in danger during high flow events. Therefore, it is usually not possible to remove debris jams safely during flooding. This work is completed as soon as it is safe to do so.

- 9) Who do I contact about FEMA³ floodplain issues?

Within unincorporated County:

Public Works Department, Engineering Services Division (925) 313-2000 or
Application/Permit Center (925) 674-7200

Within City: Please contact the City's engineering office

- 10) Who do I contact to obtain rainfall data?

*County Public Works Department, Flood Control Division – Hydrology Section
(925) 313-2000*

- 11) What was the return period for the storm the other day?

The Flood Control District operates and maintains 20+ of its own recording rain gauges. You can find recent information data from these rain gauges by going to www.cccounty.us/floodcontrol. The Hydrology Staff also monitors others' gauges by visiting web sites for other rain gauges operated by other agencies.

The rainfall return period may vary throughout the County and so the rainfall return period is specific to the location of the rain gauge. The Flood Control District can perform an independent analysis on each rain gauge. A typical rain gauge is 8 inches in diameter and can only tell us what is happening at that location. There is some chance that an isolated storm cell will miss a rain gauge and the gauge will not measure the intensity⁴ of the storm that you experienced.

The time in which the rainfall occurs is also important. For example, a gauge may record a rainfall intensity expected from a 25-year recurrence period storm for a 15-minute time period, but the 1-hour rainfall intensity may be less than a 5-year recurrence period storm.

³ FEMA = Federal Emergency Management Agency

⁴ Rainfall intensity is measured in inches of rain fall per hour, or inches/hour (in/hr).

For significant storms, the District may perform a detailed analysis of several rain gauges and may also compare the results of the rainfall analysis with stream flow measurements done by others.

To ask for a return period on a specific storm call:

County Public Works Department, Flood Control Division – Hydrology Section

Hydrographer, (925) 313-2063 or (925) 313-2000

Sr. Hydrologist, (925) 313-2274 or (925) 313-2000

12) **What is a Flood Control Zone (FCZ)?**

A Flood Control Zone is a part of Contra Costa County in which a property tax is collected to fund Flood Control projects and facilities maintenance. The Zones have boundaries that usually coincide with a watershed. Examples of Zones include the Marsh Creek Watershed (Zone 1), the Walnut Creek San Ramon Creek Watershed (Zone 3B), the Rodeo Creek Watershed (Zone 8), and the Pinole Creek Watershed (Zone 9).

The Flood Control Zones were formed back in the 1950s and 1960s and provided local funding for much of the major flood control facilities that we have and maintain today in those zones. Prior to Proposition 13, Zone Boards, which consisted of representatives from the watersheds, adjusted the tax rates of these zones annually to meet anticipated costs. Prior to Proposition 13, several of the zones had accumulated substantial funding reserves in anticipation of constructing planned facilities. Since there was enough money in these funds, the Zone Boards set the tax rate very low or at zero. In 1978, Proposition 13 froze those tax rates, in effect shutting off the tax revenue needed to adequately fund the maintenance of the Zones' flood control facilities.

The State responded by setting up the "Special District Augmentation Fund." This fund provided assistance for many years until, during a State budget crisis, the Fund was removed from the State budget. Today, several Zones remain underfunded and some have no tax revenue at all. The District is actively seeking ways to deal with the lack of funding for maintenance.

13) **What is a Drainage Area (DA)?**

A Drainage Area is an area in Contra Costa County where new development projects must pay fees for the construction of drainage and flood control facilities that will mitigate the increased storm runoff resulting from the overall development of the area. Drainage Areas have a boundary that coincides with a subwatershed area, a Drainage Plan (showing assumed land use, where areas are to drain, and planned facilities), and a Fee Ordinance. The fee is in the units of dollars per square foot of impervious surface. The fee is calculated by dividing the cost to construct the Drainage Area Plan by the estimated future impervious surface created by the land development that could occur in the watershed based on the General Plan. By following the drainage area plan and paying the fees, future development funds construction of the drainage facilities needed in the watershed.

- 14) I am a lawyer and need information from your files. Can you get that information for me? Does it cost anything? Can you analyze it for me?

We can provide data that is readily available at no cost. Beyond that there will be a fee to cover our staff time. For extensive analysis that is not readily available we will apply our “Fee for Service” policy, which is primarily a time and materials charge policy and requires an initial deposit. If the information you are requesting is related to discovery in a lawsuit, such requests must be made through the County Counsel office and the fees and charges established by law will apply.

- 15) What kind of facilities does Flood Control District design?

The Flood Control District designs storm drainage facilities and their appurtenant features. These include open channels, maintenance roads, fencing and gates, landscaping, grade control (drop) structures, closed conduit storm drainpipes, manholes, detention basins, and basin outlet structures. There is a growing movement towards creek and habitat restoration. The Flood Control District is increasingly involved in using bioengineering techniques and fluvial geomorphologic principles in its designs.

- 16) I’m not a big developer and not an engineer. Can Flood Control design my drainage system for me?

Due to liability concerns, the Flood Control District cannot directly design your facility for you. We can assist in determining design flow rates for larger watersheds using our hydrology program that calculates storm hydrographs based on Flood Control District standards.

WATERSHED QUESTIONS

17) What is a watershed and how do I affect it?

A watershed is an area of land that catches and drains water into a creek, stream or river via direct runoff or smaller tributaries and eventually ends up in a large body of water such as the Delta, Bay or ocean. As stormwater flows over land and across the watershed into the creek, it carries polluted urban runoff such as used motor oil and grease, pesticides, trash and other harmful debris. This is where the public comes in. The more we can prevent polluting the watershed, the healthier our waterways will be and the habitat it supports.

18) Who do I contact to get more involved in what's happening in the watersheds in Contra Costa County?

The Contra Costa Watershed Forum (CCWF) is an ad-hoc group of thirty or more creek and watershed restoration and protection related groups and agencies in the County. The Watershed Forum's website is <http://www.cocowaterweb.org>.

19) I saw someone discharge wastewater in a large quantity, dump debris, or construct a permanent fixture on a creek bank. I am not sure if this activity is permitted. Who should I call?

Both wastewater discharge activities and construction activities on creek banks need permits from appropriate government agencies. For unpermitted wastewater discharge and debris dumping, please call 1-800-NO-DUMPING (1-800-663-8674). For activities altering creek banks and/or creek beds, please contact the California Department of Fish and Wildlife Law Enforcement Division at (916) 653-4094.

If wastewater discharge has the potential to be a health problem, call 911 and report the problem. For non-emergency reports of wastewater discharge, please contact the Contra Costa County Environmental Health Division weekdays at (925) 608-5500 between 7:30 AM and 5:00 PM, or the Sheriff's Communication Center at (925) 646-2441 at other times.

20) I want to volunteer for creek cleanup activities. Where can I get information on where these activities are held?

The Contra Costa Watershed Forum has a calendar of events on their website, where creek related volunteer activities are listed. Its website address is www.cocowaterweb.org. Contra Costa Clean Water Program website has a list of Creek Groups, <https://www.cccleanwater.org/community/get-involved/creek-groups>, to get involved with for cleanup activities.

- 21) I want to know where creeks are located in the County. Where can I obtain a map?

The Contra Costa County Development and Conservation Department created the Contra Costa Watershed Atlas in 2003. This Atlas includes beautiful maps of creeks in the County and related beneficial information. You can also obtain these maps at the Contra Costa Clean Water Program website, www.cccleanwater.org.

- 22) Who do I call to get involved in volunteer water quality monitoring?

You may want to join a creek watershed group in the area you are interested in performing volunteer water quality monitoring and find out if they are interested in continuing or initiating water quality monitoring.

You may want to contact the Contra Costa County Watershed Program at (925) 313-2000 to inquire about volunteer monitoring in the unincorporated area or contact your City's Clean Water Program, which is often found under Public Works Department or Community Development Department.

- 23) I am a teacher and I want to find out about environmental programs I can get my students involved in. Who do I contact?

The Watershed Project, based in Richmond, provides environmental education programs for educators in the Bay Area. Their website is www.thewatershedproject.org.

- 24) How can I find out about classes, workshops, and seminars on stormwater quality issues?

Look at the Contra Costa Clean Water website at www.cccleanwater.org under "community" then "events", or call them at (925) 313-2360 for information.

- 25) What can I do to improve the environment of the watershed in my community?

Use common sense. Pollutants that reach the storm drain system or creeks have a negative impact on our environment. Find out more information about the environment and watersheds in your community. You can find information on watersheds and the environment at many websites and in publications distributed by your municipalities:

Some good web sites to visit are:

- Contra Costa Clean Water Program at www.cccleanwater.org
- The Contra Costa Watershed Forum at www.cocowaterweb.org
- The Stormwater Managers' Resource Center at www.stormwatercenter.net

WATER QUALITY QUESTIONS

For these and other questions go to the Clean Water Program's website at:

<https://www.ccleanwater.org/community/residents>.

26) Is there a difference between the storm drain and sewer system?

Yes...an important difference. Stormwater and all the pollutants that flow from our homes, parking lots and streets go into the storm drain, and are discharged directly into our creeks and other water bodies without being treated. Water and pollutants that flow into the sanitary sewer, which are separate from storm drains, such as water from our bathtubs and toilet, are sent to a wastewater treatment facility before the water is discharged to the Bay, Delta or ocean.

27) What is E-waste? How do I properly dispose of E-waste, my mercury thermometers, leftover chemicals and other household hazardous wastes?

E-waste is a popular term for electronic products nearing the end of their "useful life." Products such as computers, computer monitors, televisions, VCRs, stereos, microwaves, and fax machines are common electronic goods that can become e-waste. Many of these products can be reused or recycled. Anything containing mercury is considered a household hazardous waste. It can be found in products such as thermometers, fluorescent lighting and watch batteries.

Unfortunately, electronic discards are one of the fastest growing segments of our nation's waste stream. When we improperly dispose of e-waste, the mercury, the lead or other hazardous materials from the parts of the product will leach into surface and groundwater. Computer monitors and televisions are banned from disposal in landfills due to the high amounts of lead they contain.

Some cities allow residents to bring e-waste to a household hazardous waste facility or drop-off event. Contact your city to get information on your e-waste recycling program.

Residents can safely discard a wide variety of household hazardous wastes to their local Household Hazardous Waste Facility at no charge. Must be a resident or qualified small business in specified portion of County to use these facilities. You can dispose of mercury at a household hazardous waste (HHW) facility near you.

- East County Facility: Delta Diablo Sanitation District HHW
2550 Pittsburg-Antioch Highway, Antioch, CA
(925) 756-1990
- Central County Facility: Central Contra Costa Sanitary District HHW
4797 Imhoff Place, Martinez, CA
(800) 646-1431
- West County Facility: West Contra Costa Integrated Waste Management Authority
101 Pittsburg Ave, San Pablo, CA
(888) 412-9277

28) **The creek near my house is polluted. What can be done about it?**

You can be proactive and inform your neighbors of proper pollution prevention behaviors. You can also start a creek group and promote water health. If there is a toxic spill call 911 and trained personnel will either clean up the pollution or contact the proper agency, depending on the nature of the pollutant. For the proper number to call for your area, call 1-800-NO-DUMPING to be connected.

29) **Why should I recycle used motor oil?**

Recycling the motor oil from your car, truck, motorcycle, boat, RV or lawnmower is one way that you can demonstrate your commitment to protect the environment for future generations while conserving energy resources. Used motor oil contains heavy metals and other harmful contaminants that negatively impact the environment. We waste energy when we discard used oil into the environment.

In the U.S. approximately 42 million gallons a year of used motor oil are poured down drains, sewers or on the ground, and 52 million gallons are disposed in the trash by people who change their own oil. Compare this to the 10 million gallons spilled by the Exxon Valdez in Alaska in 1989, or the 150 million gallons spilled in the Persian Gulf in 1991.

Improper disposal of used oil costs money...your money! You pay in higher consumer prices, taxes for environmental cleanups, and increased health care costs when wastes are improperly managed. Recycling saves money and protects the environment.

30) **There's oil in the street in front of my house. What should I do about it?**

For small amounts of liquid oil, sprinkle it with kitty litter, sweep up the soiled absorbent and place it in a container for disposal at a HHW facility near you. For larger amounts of oil, call 1-800-NO-DUMPING to report the problem.

31) **Can I drain my pool into the storm drain?**

Only if the water is dechlorinated and has never been treated with copper-based algaecides. A brochure is available from your city or County Clean Water Program regarding the right way to manage pool water.

32) **Leaves and yard clippings are organic. Why can't I put them down the storm drain?**

When organic and/or yard waste decays in water, the "breakdown" process removes oxygen from the water that is necessary for the health of all aquatic species from microorganisms to fish. Essentially, it robs the aquatic life of oxygen and suffocates them.

33) **Why shouldn't I wash my car at home; I use biodegradable soap?**

When washing cars, the water runoff can enter the storm drains. This puts pollutants such as grease, dirt, oil, metals and soap into our local creeks. Even Biodegradable soaps require oxygen to breakdown, depleting our creek of the oxygen fish and other organisms need to survive. Also, just because the soap breaks down, doesn't mean it breaks down into

components that should be in the water. It is best to take your car to a car wash where the water is discharged to the Sanitary Sewer System or wash your car on a lawn or other surface where the water can be drained down and filtered through the soil.

34) It's OK to rinse my paint supplies out in the gutter, right?

No. It is not OK. All paint equipment needs to be cleaned in a sink that is plumbed to sanitary sewer. Any sink in your house should do. Also, water based paints can be dried out and put in the garbage. But, oil-based paints should be disposed of at a household hazardous waste site.

35) What am I supposed to do with my dirty mop water; I don't want to dump it in my clean sink.

If something is too dirty or "gross" for you to want to dump it in a sink in your home, it is definitely not acceptable for the storm drain. The water should go into the sink or pour in onto your yard or dirt to soak into the ground. Remember, only rain down the storm drain!

36) Who do I contact to report illegal dumping into creeks and drainage courses or other water bodies?

- If the dumping was observed, first call the County Sheriff's Dispatch, (925) 646-2441 or the City's Police Department (If possible, please take pictures or record the vehicle description/license plate number.).
- 1-800-NO-DUMPING
- Regional Water Quality Control Board, (510) 622-2300
- Within unincorporated County/Flood Control District Facility County
Public Works/Flood Control District, (925) 313-2000
County Maintenance Division, (925) 313-7000
- Within City: Please contact the City's public works office
- Department of Fish and Wildlife, Regulations (707) 944-5549

37) How do I report a complaint regarding a street sweeper?

In the unincorporated area, call the Public Works Department (925) 313-2000 and ask to speak to the Watershed Program staff person who handles the street sweeping program. If not in the unincorporated area, call your city or town (usually the Public Works Department). More information and sweeping schedule for your area is posted on the Public Works Department website: www.cccounty.us/streetsweeping

Please Note: *The street sweeper is not required to pick up large sized material that is dumped onto the street.* The street sweeper's job is to do routine sweeping of curbs and gutters. The machines are not capable of picking up large amounts of dumped material. If this is the encountered, the operators have been instructed to go around it.

38) Where can I obtain a brochure or information on a stormwater quality issue?

- Most information can be obtained from the County Clean Water website at <https://www.cccleanwater.org/community/residents> or www.cccrecycle.org
- Call the Public Works Department and ask to speak to a Watershed Program staff person

39) Why is water from the faucet healthy for us, but toxic to aquatic life?

Chloramines used to disinfect drinking water are toxic to fish and amphibians at levels that are safe for human consumption.

AM:

G:\fldctl\Administration\Business Plan\Frequently Asked Questions\For Website_2020\Drainage, Watershed, and Water Quality.docx