

Fillmore to create panel to target water softeners

By [Sam Richard \(Contact\)](#)
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To prevent damage to farmers' crops, Fillmore will soon establish a committee to reduce chloride levels in wastewater discharged into the Santa Clara River and groundwater.

The Fillmore City Council voted 4-0 Tuesday night, with Councilwoman Cecilia Cuevas absent, on a motion to establish the Chloride Control Citizens Committee, an advisory group aimed at encouraging residents to dispose of water softeners.

Softeners contribute to levels of chloride in groundwater and the river.

Residents will be solicited to fill five spots on the committee, and city officials want a diverse group of people to reflect the whole community, said Councilman Scott Lee, who will chair the panel.

"It needs to be done," Lee said Wednesday. "We need input from the community."

Water softeners soften "hard" water, which usually has high levels of calcium and magnesium. The devices soften water by exchanging sodium ions with calcium and magnesium ions.

Softened water has high levels of chloride. Some of it goes through Fillmore's sewer system to its water recycling facility and eventually into groundwater or the river.

Water taken from the river or groundwater can damage crops if chloride levels are high enough.

The committee will seek to lower chloride to an acceptable level, Lee said.

City officials expect the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board to impose requirements on Fillmore next year to reduce chloride levels by 2013, said Bert Rapp, director of public works.

Currently, the amount of chlorides in wastewater is 155 milligrams per liter. The acceptable level would be 100 milligrams per liter, and the city could lower the levels if softeners are eliminated, Rapp said.

Lee said the committee could explore several alternatives:

n A water-softening plant, which could cost about \$30 million, could be built. It would soften water for residents without discharging into the river or groundwater, but residents' water bills could increase by \$30 or \$40 each.

n The committee could educate residents about softeners and their impact.

n Residents could report people who have illegal softeners. Tipsters would receive reward money.

The city has about 450 illegal softeners, according to Rapp.

A city ordinance prohibits residents from buying new softeners. It says residents who buy new softeners could be fined \$1,000 or jailed for up to 30 days, or both.

About 50 legal softeners were in use in Fillmore before the ordinance passed, and residents who have them have permits, Rapp said.

Fillmore resident Gayle Washburn said she has expressed interest in joining the committee and will likely do so.

She does not like the idea of reporting residents with illegal softeners, though.

"I don't see people using water softeners as being criminals," she said. "I think that's the way the city sees them. ... We're not trying to turn a community into criminals."

Washburn said she would like to educate residents and give them incentives to dispose of their water softeners.

The public will be invited to the committee's meetings, Lee said.

The council will provide direction to the committee and will make final decisions on proposed plans, Lee said. He said the committee should have some plans to offer by the end of the year.

Washburn said she would also like to get advice from Santa Clarita officials, who are pursuing a similar goal.

Santa Clarita banned new water softeners in early 2003, officials said.

Since then, as the city has tried to dispose of water softeners, chloride levels in discharged wastewater went from 200 milligrams per liter to about 140 milligrams per liter, said Paul Martyn, head of the industrial waste section of the Los Angeles County Sanitation District, which operates both of the city's water recycling facilities.

The softeners were not the only factor that helped reduce levels of chlorides, but they were a part of it, said Gail Ortiz, a spokeswoman for the city.