

## DESCRIPTION

Los Osos Creek drains 16,933 acres, and originates on the slopes of Clark Valley in the Irish Hills. The creek flows north until it reaches the floor of Clark Valley, where it turns west and flows towards Los Osos Valley. When it reaches Los Osos Valley, the creek abruptly reverses direction and heads northeast, before heading north and west again and joining with Warden Creek some 4,000 feet upstream of the estuary.

In this Critical Coastal Area (CCA) watershed, nitrates and phosphates in surface water contribute to growth of nuisance algae and decreased dissolved oxygen levels, and Steelhead trout habitat is degraded in the creek. Sources include septic systems, fertilizers, urban runoff, and animal waste. The Los Osos Community Service District's community wastewater project helps to address this issue.

Waterbodies in this CCA that are listed as impaired on the current (2016) Clean Water Act 303(d) list in this CCA are **Los Osos Creek Estuary** (impaired by turbidity, nitrate, dissolved oxygen, and fecal coliform bacteria); **Lower Los Osos Creek – Los Osos to Los Osos Creek Estuary** (impaired by sedimentation/siltation, fecal coliform bacteria, dissolved oxygen, and nitrate); **Upper Los Osos Creek – upstream of Los Osos** (impaired by dissolved oxygen); and **Warden Creek** (impaired by fecal coliform bacteria, E. coli bacteria, dissolved oxygen, and nitrate).

Potential sources of these pollutants, organized by **Source Categories**, are listed as **Agriculture** (agriculture, and grazing-related sources); **Habitat Modification** (erosion/siltation); **Urban Runoff** (urban runoff/storm sewers); **Waste Storage and Disposal** (onsite wastewater systems – septic tanks); **Miscellaneous** (domestic pet waste, and transient encampments); **Natural Sources**; and **Source Unknown**.

## CRITERIA FOR CCA IDENTIFICATION

The Los Osos Creek [Critical Coastal Area](#) (CCA) was identified in 2002 using the criterion of a coastal watershed where an impaired waterbody on the 2002 Clean Water Act 303(d) list (Los Osos Creek) flows into a state Marine Managed Area (Morro Bay State Estuary).

This CCA also met the 2014 CCA identification criterion of a coastal watershed where an impaired waterbody on the 2010 303(d) list (Los Osos Creek) flows into a state-identified Principal Bay or Estuary (Morro Bay). See California Department of Fish and Wildlife's "[California's Living Marine Resources: A Status Report](#)" (2001) and associated [map of the Principal Bays and Estuaries of California](#).

In addition, this CCA met the 2014 CCA identification criterion of a coastal watershed where an impaired waterbody on the 2010 Clean Water Act 303(d) list (Los Osos Creek) is adjacent to a [California Marine Protected Area](#) (Morro Bay State Marine Reserve).



**Los Osos Creek Estuary,  
Morro Bay**

(Photo courtesy Bobby Jo Close, Central Coast Wetland Working Group).

For more photos, see the [California Coastal Records Project](#).

## ADDRESSING POLLUTANTS

Section 303(d) of the federal Clean Water Act requires states to make a [list of impaired waters](#) that are not attaining water quality standards, and to develop a [Total Maximum Daily Load \(TMDL\)](#) or similar approach to account for all sources of the pollutants that caused the water to be listed as impaired. TMDLs include allocations to both point and nonpoint sources (NPS) of the listed pollutants. The current (2016) 303(d) list of impaired waterbodies includes pollutants, potential pollutant sources, and year a TMDL was approved or is expected.

To address NPS pollutants, see [California's Nonpoint Source Management Measures](#) for guidance on selecting appropriate Management Measures, which consist of a suite of plans, practices, technologies, operating methods, or other measures that may be used to control NPS pollution.

Information for this factsheet was originally compiled by members of California's Critical Coastal Areas Statewide Committee in 2006. The factsheet was revised and updated in 2019 by the California Coastal Commission's Water Quality Program staff.

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