

Sonoma Ecology Center and Daily Acts



Photos courtesy of Sonoma Ecology Center



Sonoma Ecology Center (est. 1990) works to address challenges related to water supply and quality, open space, rural character, biodiversity, energy, climate change, and a better quality of life for all residents.

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Both organizations have many years of collaborative, community-oriented, multiple-benefit action, and both have deep local roots as well as a track record of engagement in Bay-wide community issues.



Daily Acts (est. 2002) is a holistic education nonprofit that takes a heart-centered approach to inspiring transformative actions that create connected, equitable, and climate resilient communities.

Daily Acts believes in the power of daily actions to reconnect people to self, community, and place, which helps to heal our society and planet. Their mission is to inspire transformative action that creates connected, equitable, climate resilient communities.



Project Description

Sonoma Ecology Center (SEC) and Daily Acts Organization (DAO) partnered on this project with their community in southern Sonoma County to conduct outreach and needs assessments to collect information about the issues and needs related to water facing their disadvantaged communities (DACs) in Petaluma and The Springs community of Sonoma Valley. Their goal was to reach a representative group of their DAC area to learn about the various issues and assets community members experience related to water, and to begin to develop a strategy for how to address the issues identified.

Background on Petaluma and The Springs

Demographics

The city of Petaluma is located in Sonoma County and has a population of 60,767 (U.S. Census, 2019). Petaluma is predominantly white, with a significant Hispanic or Latino population (22%) and small Asian (5%) and Black or African American populations (1%) (U.S. Census, 2019). The Petaluma General Plan 2025 states that “the North McDowell Boulevard subarea also contains a significant portion of the city’s senior housing. South of Corona Road, four mobile homes parks and one apartment complex are located along North McDowell Boulevard, providing affordable living for Petaluma’s seniors and families” (City of Petaluma, 2008, 2021).

The unincorporated areas of Fethers Hot Springs/Agua Caliente West Tract of southern Sonoma Valley within Sonoma County are known as “The Springs.” With a population of just over 5,000, The Springs area has the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) score in Sonoma County outside of southwest Santa Rosa, and lies amid census tracts with much higher HDI scores (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2014). 45% of adults lack high school diplomas, and median personal earnings in The Springs are third from last among Sonoma’s 99 tracts. 25.3% of individuals fall below the poverty level in The Springs, compared to 15.3% in California, and 11.5% in Sonoma County.



Photos courtesy of Sonoma Ecology Center and Daily Acts

History of Environmental Injustice and Inequity in Petaluma and the Springs

There are multiple locations and situations in southern Sonoma County where residents are at a disadvantage in relation to water:

- Residents may lack access to decision-making processes about water.
- Residents may lack access to information and support to make positive behavior change.
- Local organizations may have trouble obtaining participation by traditional means.

- Larger scale projects to increase water security may be needed, such as stormwater capture for groundwater recharge, but they are contingent on support from the community, including disadvantaged landowners and residents of key parcels.
- There may be a language or cultural barrier to participation.
- Public sites such as public schools, which disproportionately serve disadvantaged residents, are primarily impervious, often lacking vegetation and other low impact development features.
- The Springs is identified as an Urban Service Area for the County of Sonoma, but it does not have any town or city government. The county is set up to serve rural areas, so the Urban Service Areas that lack local government also are lacking in much of the infrastructure for urban areas like storm drains, sidewalks, and local services.
- Heavy traffic, large parcels featuring a mix of residential, commercial, and industrial development, discontinuous sidewalks, and no bike lane make North McDowell difficult to navigate on foot or bicycle.

Community-Identified Strengths and Assets

The Springs area of Sonoma Valley has been designated a Rural Investment Area (RIA) by the regional planning agency, the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG). RIAs are centers and corridors of economic and community activity surrounded by agricultural, resource, or protected conservation lands. RIAs present an opportunity to preserve a rural character and scale while integrating a range of housing types, local retail, and cultural and civic activities. Other key components of RIAs include an inviting public realm and strong pedestrian and bicycle connectivity between the area and surrounding neighborhoods. RIA designation makes The Springs eligible for federal funding, and zoned to accommodate limited growth and economic activity, with the goal to limit growth and reduce development pressure on surrounding open space and agricultural areas.

The east side of Petaluma is characterized by residential neighborhoods and contains a significant portion of the city's 55+ (age 55 and older) communities. The east side of Petaluma was designed to be primarily residential and includes many parks and trails along the creeks. However, there are many opportunities to improve pedestrian access to trails, according to the 2025 Petaluma General Plan.



One of the community events where Sonoma Ecology Center and Daily Acts engaged community members.

Image provided by Sonoma Ecology Center and Daily Acts.

Summary of Outreach and Education Efforts

SEC and DAO collected assessments from April 2019 to January 2020. Needs assessment surveys and conversations were conducted in Spanish and English at many community events including farmers markets, health fairs, housing events, community celebrations, and school events. Overall, SEC and DAO collected 203 needs assessment surveys through two primary methods: 1) sending a postcard to targeted residents in Petaluma and The Springs area of Sonoma Valley with a link to the online survey, as well as 2) collecting surveys through conversation with residents at various community outreach events. Roughly 40% of total responses were from Petaluma, and 60% from Sonoma Valley (The Springs).



Needs assessment surveys and conversations were held with Sonoma Valley residents at community events from April 2019 to January 2020.

Photos courtesy of Sonoma Ecology Center and Daily Acts

Needs Assessment Findings

The top priority water issues identified in Petaluma and South Sonoma were:

- Drinking water
- Stormwater
- Trash/dumping
- Community improvements

Some results are broken down by Sonoma Valley (The Springs) and Petaluma.



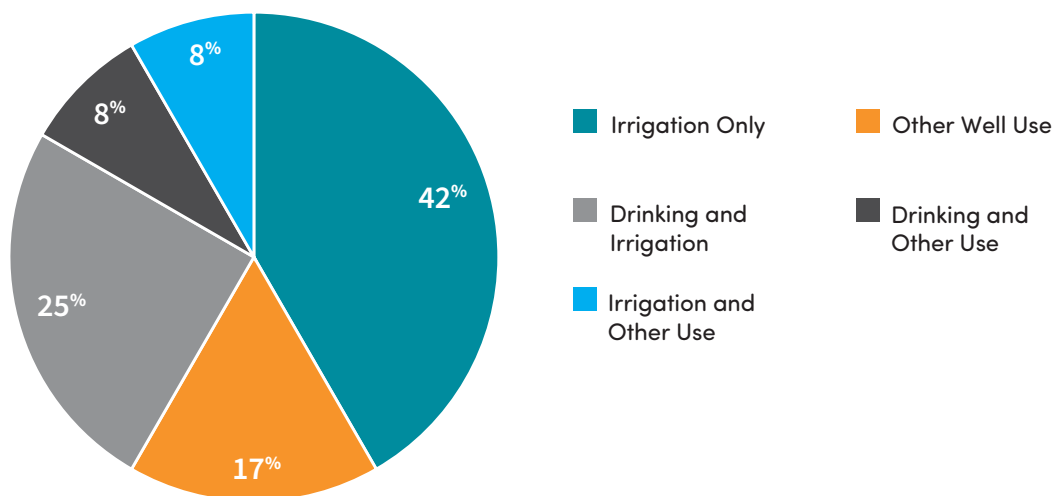
Drinking Water

In Sonoma Valley (The Springs), 48% of residents said they only drink bottled or filtered water. Examples of qualitative responses to the survey about drinking water issues include:

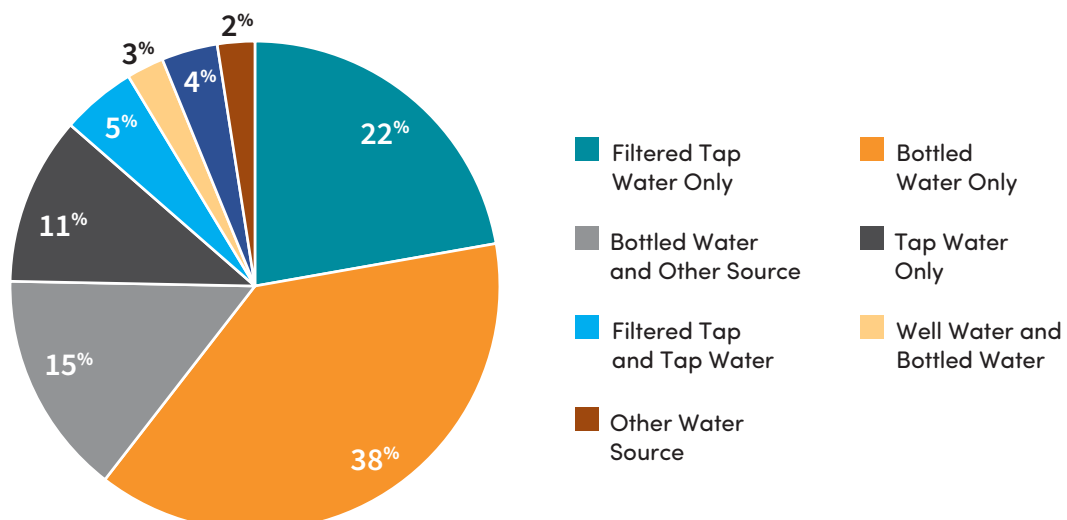
“I think that tap water is not safe to drink.”

“If I had to drink it [tap water], I would boil it first to get rid of the chlorine.”

Well Water Use - Sonoma Valley (The Springs)



Home Drinking Water Sources - Petaluma



In Petaluma, 60% of residents said they only drink bottled or filtered water. Examples of qualitative responses to the survey about drinking water issues include:

“I don’t like the smell of [the tap] water.”

“...I have little confidence in the tap water because it comes out of the tap white.”

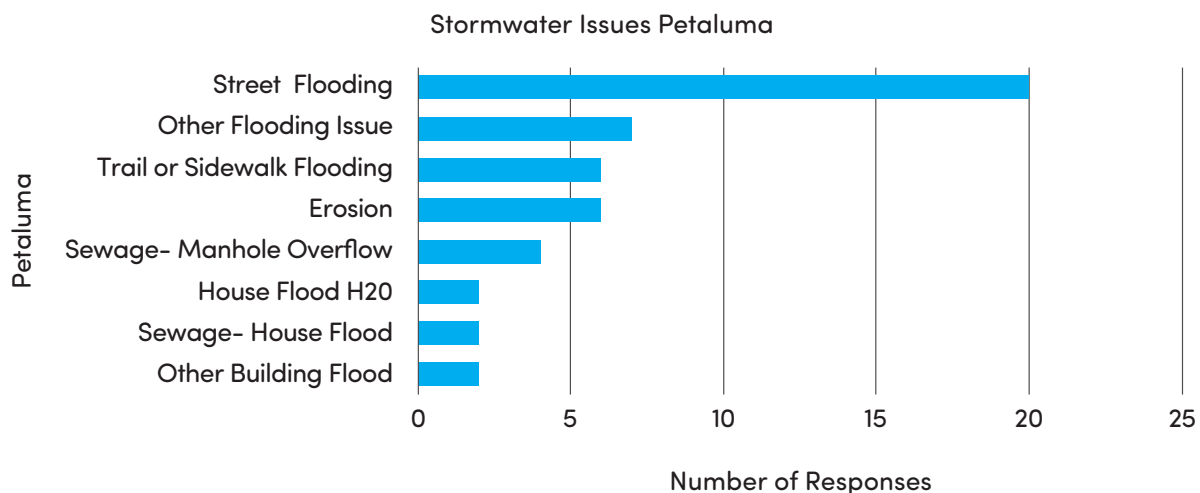
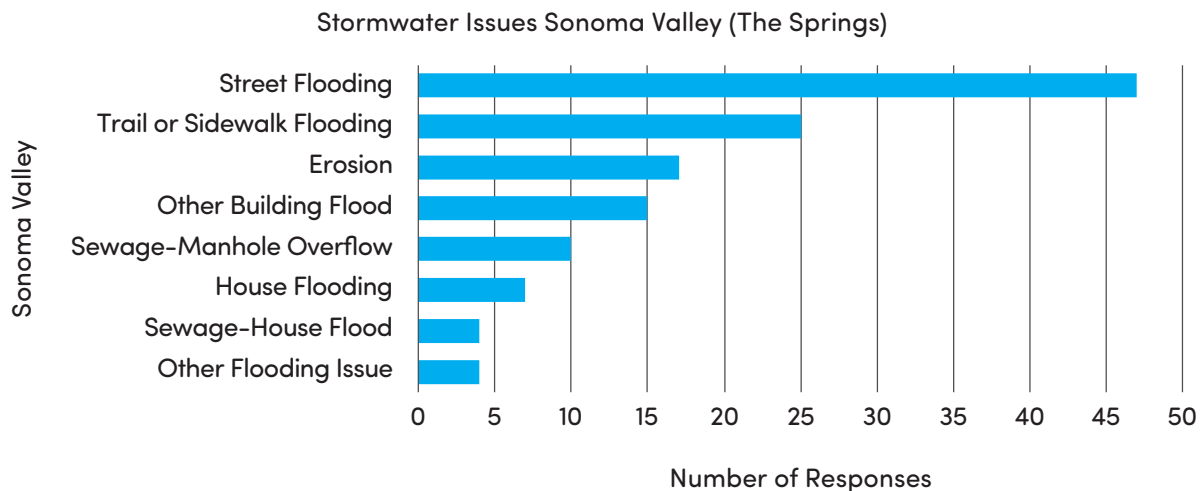
Many respondents specifically identified smell, which they interpreted to be chlorine, as a drinking water quality issue.

Few respondents relied on well water, and those that did reported no issues with flow rate or quality.

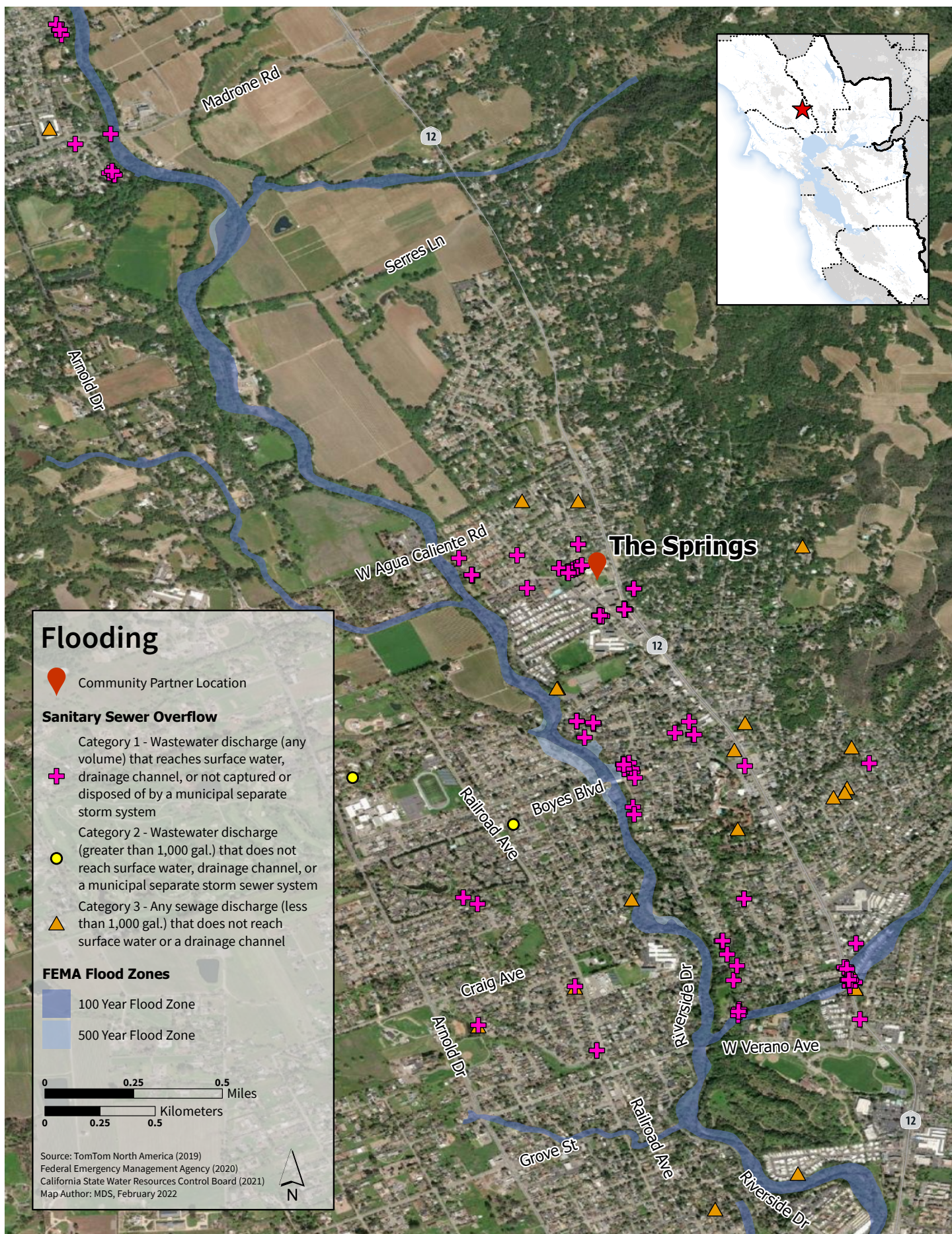


Stormwater

The top stormwater issues identified by survey respondents were street flooding (67%), trail and sidewalk flooding (32%), erosion (23%), and sewage-manhole overflows (14%). While overflow from manholes was observed by a small percentage of respondents, it represents a large public health issue. The concentration of reported overflows was from The Springs area of Sonoma Valley.



Sanitary sewer overflow (SSO) observations are corroborated by State Water Resources Control Board documentation. The map on the following page shows the locations of discharges of between 10,000 and 100,000 gallons of sewage into DAC areas along Highway 12.

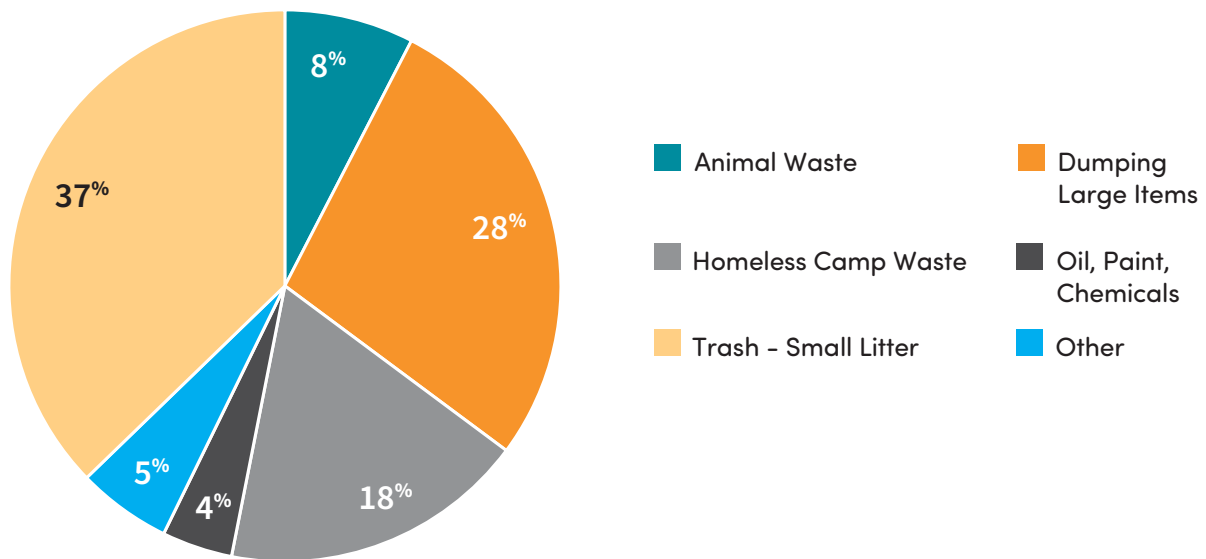




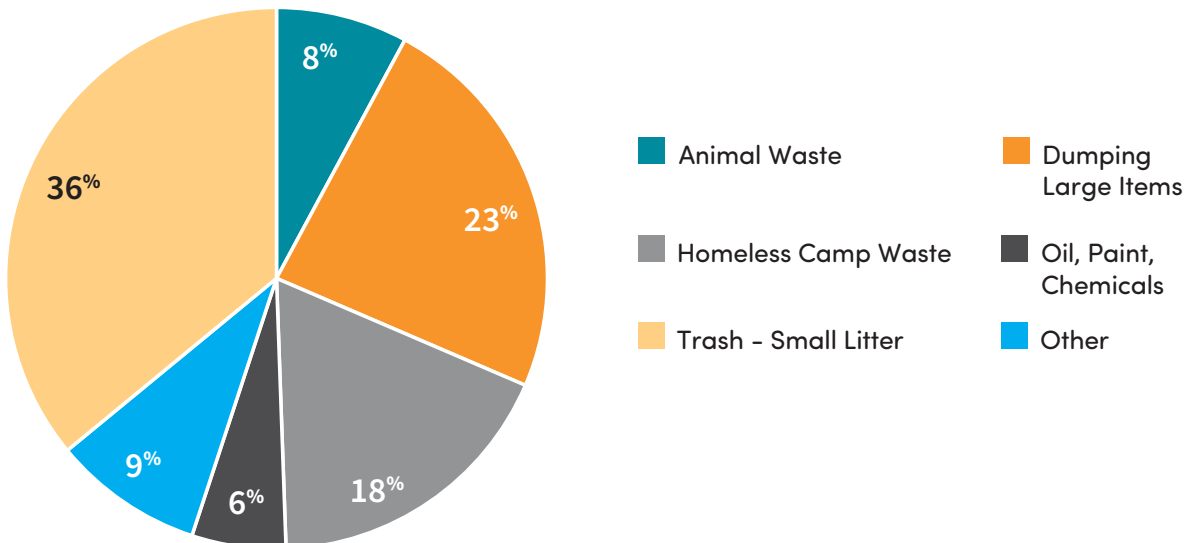
Trash and Dumping

The primary issues reported were trash and small litter, large illegally dumped items, and homeless-camp waste, all of which have impacts on water quality.

Waste and Dumping Issues – Sonoma Valley (The Springs)



Waste and Dumping Issues – Petaluma



Community Improvements

Respondents mentioned a desire for community improvement projects. The highest priority for both communities identified was for creek or trail cleanups to remove garbage accumulation. This was closely followed by a desire for more playgrounds and more trails to improve pedestrian and bicycle circulation. In The Springs, the desire for playgrounds was slightly higher, and in Petaluma, the desire for trails was slightly higher. Both communities also expressed interest in rain barrels, public landscaping, and other improvements.

Next Steps

Drinking Water

SEC and DAO would like to conduct outreach to Petaluma and The Springs communities about water quality (an expanded 'Take it from the Tap' campaign in Spanish); offer water quality testing through the DACTI Program regional tap testing effort; and offer portable water filters. SEC and DAO are also interested in pursuing the development of water bottle fill stations from the local water supply. Such public filling stations could easily be tested and encouraged to address folks' lack of trust in water, and to reduce the amount of bottled water people are buying.

Stormwater

Sonoma Water, the flood protection and water supply agency for the area, has a stormwater resources plan which covers the areas of Petaluma and The Springs, and Sonoma Water has expressed interest in partnering with SEC and DAO on stormwater projects in southern Sonoma. Priority work includes assessing potential stormwater detention properties, conducting landowner outreach, and completing a feasibility assessment to identify opportunities in the hills to retain stormwater onsite. This opportunity would benefit The Springs by reducing stormwater flooding in Sonoma Creek, which can overflow into streets and disrupt community members' daily lives.



Sanitary Sewer Overflow (SSO) in The Springs neighborhood of Sonoma Valley.

Photo: Richard Dale

Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs)

Flooding and creek overflow is getting into the sanitary system, causing it to overflow in some areas. Sonoma Water is now working on a project to expand the capacity of the main sewer line to address some of these overflow issues. SEC and DAO think it would also be beneficial to the Springs to conduct a comprehensive investigation of conditions contributing to downstream SSOs from Sonoma Development Center to The Springs. On-the-ground, wet-weather site assessments and field data collection (photos with timestamps) to assess Sonoma Development Center storm water and major creeks and flooding areas between Sonoma Development Center and Verano Avenue (approximately 4.5 miles) could help identify opportunities to prevent stormwater from getting into the sewer system.



Two participants picking up trash during a Daily Acts community creek cleanup.

Photo: Sarina Consulter

Trash and Dumping

Related to trash and dumping, SEC and DAO would like to organize cleanup events and an outreach campaign about proper garbage disposal, recycling, and community development.



Daily Acts held community listening sessions to receive feedback on thoughts related to water.

Photo: Sarina Consulter

General Next Steps

Overall, SEC and DAO will continue to work with the City of Petaluma and southern Sonoma partners to improve their communities. They are presenting the needs assessment findings back to the community and other stakeholders for feedback and working to co-develop projects and pursue funding to address issues identified in the needs assessment process.

SEC and DAO are following up on several types of projects to address issues from the needs assessment, including:

- Creek or trail cleanups
- Storm water management projects
- Park cleanups and restoration projects to address erosion and other issues
- Outdoor education and recreation programs
- Sewage infrastructure improvements planning

References

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