

## Tides of Change

When Dan Hauser and his friend Wesley Chesbro won the Arcata city council race, their opponents did not concede gracefully. “I’m not a poor loser,” claimed Clyde Johnson, just before he called Hauser and Chesbro “rangatangs.” Then Johnson and the other disappointed candidates accused the winners of using dirty campaign tricks—just like President Nixon. Arcata’s weekly paper, the *Union*, ran the details of the post-election flap on its front page.

That March of 1974, the national obsession with the Watergate scandal reached its peak. The president’s closest aides were on trial for burglary, wiretapping, and obstruction of justice. Nixon had become an international symbol of corruption, and the polls showed his public approval rating plummeting to an all-time low. So while Hauser and Chesbro could laugh off the comparison to an ape, when they were likened to the president the insult cut deep.

It was a rough time to start a political career, especially in Arcata, an old logging town on the shores of Humboldt Bay in California’s damp northwest corner. The community was splitting in two like a redwood slat struck with an ax. On one side stood ranchers and timber workers, many of them descendants of the first pioneers to settle here in the 1850s. On the other were outsiders like Hauser and Chesbro, people who’d recently migrated to town to study or teach at Humboldt State University (HSU), and who’d decided to stay in this foggy enclave, 250 miles north of San Francisco. Now, for the first time, the outsiders controlled the city council.

The old-time Arcatans felt like victims of an alien invasion. That feeling intensified when the national fad for high-speed nudity reached HSU. A few days after the election, four young guys ran naked through the University quad. Behind them, the crowns of the redwood trees at the edge of campus vanished into the fog. A cold rain fell as the earnest exhibitionists moved across the lawn, and goosebumps rose all over their bodies. They were members of the Streakers for Impeachment Committee, a national organization dedicated to streaking for the ouster of President Nixon.

Dan Hauser was a mild-mannered insurance adjuster and liberal Democrat, caught in the clash between the buck-naked protesters on campus and traditional Arcata families. The accusations of “Watergate-style dirty tricks” against him and

Chesbro were wildly overblown. The losers were reacting to a skit broadcast on the university radio station just before the election. It mocked all the contenders but was kind to Hauser and Chesbro. The broadcast, the defeated candidates complained, “crossed the lines of fair play and good taste.”

Hauser had known nothing about the radio sketch until after it was aired. He had spent the campaign walking all over town, knocking on doors and explaining his stand on land-use planning to anyone who would listen. On days when he couldn't summon up the will to go out and campaign, his eleven-year-old daughter gave him a pep talk and went along with him.

Two months before the 1974 election the Brizard-Matthews Machinery Company, owned by two long-time Humboldt County families, bought a full-page ad in the *Union*. They used the space for a political call to arms. Their ad accused environmentalists of wrecking the local economy by fighting to put more forests in national parks, and of raising food prices by working to “ban DDT and other necessary pesticides.” It urged readers to get out and vote—against people like Hauser and Chesbro.

The two new council members disagreed with Arcata's conservatives on everything from the Vietnam War to forestry reform. They won the election with the help of a strong voter turnout from HSU students, who'd never wielded much influence in town before. But after a change in federal law granted eighteen-year-olds the right to vote in 1972, Arcata politics would never be the same.

The old Arcata stalwarts knew it, too. The night before the council election, Hauser and Chesbro walked up to campus to post their campaign literature. Everywhere they went they found the walls already covered with flyers that urged the students not to vote. *This isn't your community*, the flyers read. *You shouldn't determine the city's government*.

The “Don't Vote” propaganda was Lois Arkley's idea. Lois, the daughter of Robert Matthews of Brizard-Matthews, worked the campus that evening with her husband Robin, a conservative mill owner and rancher. The Arkleys stood united in their loathing of the political changes they saw coming. “Chesbro was born for us to hate,” recalls Robin Arkley. “Here was this hippie kid with long hair and a scraggly beard, who was going to be running our town. We felt we were being totally disenfranchised.”

“My first reaction was to tear those posters down,” says Hauser. “But Wesley, being more politically astute than I was, said we should leave them up, because it would make the students mad enough to get out and vote. And in the end it did have that reaction. So we followed along behind the Arkleys. And we put our posters up next to theirs.”

Hauser is a tall, soft-spoken man, a shy person whose stomach used to clench when he had to speak in public. It took a lot of Roloids to get him through the city council campaign. In 1974, he'd been married for ten years to his high school sweetheart, Donna, and they had two young kids.

When he was growing up in southern California, Hauser watched urban sprawl devour the farmland around his home in Orange County. By 1961, when he started college, the truck gardens and orange groves he'd loved as a kid were

wiped out. "Traffic was becoming impossible," he says, "and it was not where I wanted to raise a family." He discovered Humboldt County during a fishing trip with his dad, and two years later, he and his new wife moved north.

His campaign for city council focused on resisting uncontrolled development. Arcata was still surrounded by second-growth forests and pastures dotted with dairy cows. Seven miles of farm fields stretched along the edge of the bay between Arcata and Eureka, the nearest city to the south, and Hauser wanted to keep them open.

If you pulled off of Highway 101 and spent a few minutes in those fields, you'd see much more than cows. A red-shouldered hawk would pass overhead. Then a great egret, three feet tall and draped in startling white plumes, would stalk by. The big birds liked to loiter in pastures, where they found easy prey. Field mice gave themselves away when they ran from the crushing hooves of the cattle.

Hauser knew that developers were eager to change this bucolic scene. The city of Eureka had recently tried to annex a large chunk of farmland, hoping to pave the way for a series of fast-food places, motels, and shopping centers. The tide that had washed away rural Orange County waited to sweep into Humboldt.

He had campaigned against a big development that the Fords, an old-time Humboldt County ranching and logging family, planned to build south of Arcata. "It was the wrong development in the wrong place," he says. "I'd done my homework. The bay muds would not support the kinds of structures they wanted to build at that location." There was no sewer system there, either, so the waste from the apartment complex and shopping center the Fords envisioned would have nowhere to go. Ultimately, Hauser's efforts defeated the development, but they also earned him some dedicated enemies.

A group of long-time Arcatans formed an organization they called Arcata Forever, and proceeded to spend the next few years making life difficult for Hauser and Chesbro. "They saw us as somewhere very far to the left of Josef Stalin," says Hauser. "We were anti-Vietnam War, so we were therefore anti-patriotic."

By the time of his first city council meeting, Hauser had seen enough to know that his critics would be loud and uninhibited, but he thought he knew what to expect. "My issues were land-use planning and historic preservation," he says. "I knew some of that would be controversial but I thought the majority of the people would support it."

He knew nothing about the regional sewage project that appeared on the agenda at that first meeting. He didn't know that he'd spend the next six years fighting against the big sewage plant, while every authority figure in sight assured him his cause was hopeless.

"We'd had no preparation for this issue, and Wesley and I balked, things were going over our heads," says Hauser. "At the end of the meeting, a friend came up to me and just blasted me for not taking a strong stand. I said, 'I don't even know what they're talking about.'"

In all the technical documents that had been thrown at him, one thing caught Hauser's eye. It was a diagram that showed a sewer line running from Arcata south to Eureka along Highway 101, at the edge of the pastureland he'd been trying to protect. If that sewer line was ever built, the cow pastures would be

turned into a developer's field of dreams. Anyone who paid attention knew that if you built sewers, they'd come.

Humboldt Bay was in trouble: That much was undeniable. A 1973 survey found sixty-three different pipes oozing mysterious fluids into the water, sources unknown. The city of Eureka had three separate sewage treatment plants, none of which worked reliably or reached modern standards. In the hard rains of winter, treatment capacity was overloaded and raw wastewater flowed into the bay. The creeks rose, carrying loads of silt and manure downstream from the dairy pastures.

Humboldt County was in step with the times. All over the US, aquatic creatures choked on human waste. Fish in the Great Lakes floated belly-up by the thousands. The surface of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, smothered in oil from industrial discharges, burst into flame.

Nothing so dramatic happened on Humboldt Bay. Instead it was oysters that raised the alarm, like silent canaries in a subaquatic coal mine. In January 1973, a few months after Congress had passed the Clean Water Act, state inspectors found that oysters in the bay were contaminated with fecal coliform bacteria, microbes that thrive in human and animal feces. The entire bay was quarantined for months.

Humboldt Bay had become California's oyster capital after the once-thriving San Francisco fishery died out in the early 1900s. The native oysters there were gone, suffocated in a big-city deluge of raw sewage. Subjected to only a fraction of San Francisco Bay's human population, Humboldt's waters were relatively clean. The oyster farming industry got rolling in the 1950s, when some local entrepreneurs began to ship seed oysters in from Japan. The shellfish thrived in the fertile waters off Arcata and Eureka. Oyster farmers boating out to their underwater fields became an everyday part of life on the bay. Business boomed until the state inspectors shut it down that winter of 1973.

Oysters spend their entire adult lives anchored to one spot, and eat by pumping water through their guts, filtering out and digesting bits of algae, bacteria, and debris. Any microbe in the water will accumulate inside oysters. By the 1960s, scientists had begun to use them as living barometers of sewage pollution. Oysters were no longer just a popular delicacy on the half shell; they offered undeniable proof that Humboldt Bay, like so many other bodies of water, was tainted.

On a gray afternoon in the spring of 1973, Robert Rasmussen stood at the doorway of the Ingomar Club, an ornate Victorian mansion so close to Humboldt Bay that he could hear the tide sloshing against a cement seawall. Bearded and rotund, Rasmussen resembled a youthful Santa Claus, but he was feeling tense rather than jolly. He loitered, examining the complicated curlicues of the building's wooden trim. He'd never been this close to it before, didn't belong in this bastion of the county's most powerful men.

Rasmussen, a botany professor moonlighting as an environmental consultant, had only been invited to lunch at the Ingomar because, as he explains it, "The shit was hitting the proverbial fan."

Waiting inside the Ingomar was a small knot of men in suits. The group centered around David Joseph, the director of the Regional Water Quality Control

Board, a short, stocky man exuding an air of command. He'd helped to write clean water policies for the entire state of California, and he believed there was only one way to address the problems in Humboldt.

Joseph wanted a high-tech, centralized treatment plant that would bypass the bay and discharge straight into the Pacific. All the sewage from Arcata and Eureka would have to be routed to one site, piped under the floor of the bay, treated and released into the ocean. There'd be lots of expensive design and construction work involved. The engineers from Metcalf & Eddy, who sat with Joseph amid the polished oak and crystal of the club, were glad such a plum job had dropped into their laps.

The men waiting for Rasmussen were expecting him to act as one more cog in the machinery the Clean Water Act of 1972 had set in motion. The legislation provided grant money to states for the construction of sewage treatment facilities—a lot of grant money. Confident that the feds would pick up much of the tab, Joseph and his colleagues had written a Basin Plan for the north coast, an edict that forbade any discharge of sewage into the bay, treated or not. The cities of Eureka and Arcata had clubbed together to hire Metcalf & Eddy to design a new system for central Humboldt County, so that they could comply with the Basin Plan. Metcalf & Eddy hired Bob Rasmussen's little firm, Environmental Research Consultants, to write the Environmental Impact Report, a new-fangled document required by the recently passed California Environmental Quality Act. Rasmussen was the smallest fish in a vast bureaucratic pond.

A heavy door swung open on well-oiled hinges, and Rasmussen was ushered into the Ingomar's high-ceilinged dining room. He sat across from Ron Robie, an influential young water attorney with California's State Water Resources Control Board. Years later, Rasmussen, having forgotten Robie's name, would inaccurately describe him as "Joseph's sycophantic junior."

"That whippersnapper told me this would be the easiest money I'd ever make," says Rasmussen. "All I had to do was follow the guidelines they'd already written, agree that a regional system was the only way to go." Rasmussen nodded at Robie and made vague, affirmative noises. Then he went out and wrote a report that said the state strategy was all wrong.

Humboldt Bay, he argued, had always been a natural sump. Every winter's rains washed nutrient-rich silt off the hills, into the creeks, and down to the bay. The muddy bay bottom grew a thick crop of eelgrass, the wide green blades swaying in unison, bending in the direction of the prevailing tide. The eelgrass sheltered an array of mollusks, worms, and young fish, and fed thousands of waterfowl that passed through on their long migrations. The plants, rooted in a deep black goo composed of their own decaying leaves, of dead saltmarsh plants and algae and small water creatures, formed an important habitat, one worthy of protection. It was also, Rasmussen wrote, a habitat "adapted to defecation and decay."<sup>1</sup>

The bay, he argued, was better suited to absorb treated sewage than the ocean. As long as the treatment process removed harmful bacteria, a bit of effluent should do no harm. Existing studies suggested that sewage did not constitute a significant addition to the rich stew of natural nutrients in Humboldt Bay. By con-

trast, sewage discharges to the open ocean, which were already standard procedure on the southern California coast, had been shown to alter the ecology of the waters near outfall pipes. Algae bloomed; the number of marine species dwindled.

Rasmussen's report was a long riff of criticism against the conventional approach to sewage pollution. Whether effluent was discharged to the bay or the ocean, dumping the stuff rather than recycling it would prove to be a temporary fix, not a long-term solution, he insisted. The idea that the temporary fix had to be ocean disposal was based on politics, not biology.

Despite the sixty-three anonymous discharge pipes, the plants in Eureka leaking raw sewage, and the steady flow of dissolved cow manure, the only immediate problem in the bay was bacterial contamination. Yes, the communities at the water's fringe needed to clean up their act, treat their sewage and disinfect it. But there was no reason, other than Joseph's edict, that they had to build a pipeline to carry their effluent beyond the bay.

The engineers at Metcalf & Eddy were stunned when they read Rasmussen's report. He took the skeptical engineers out onto the bay and showed them the abundant growth of eelgrass rising out of the muck. He convinced them.

"The benefits of ocean discharge are illusory," the Metcalf & Eddy staff wrote in the documents they submitted to the cities of Arcata and Eureka. They recommended that Eureka build one high-capacity treatment plant that could handle all the city's sewage. Arcata's plant, which was already in good working condition, needed only a minor upgrade to ensure that the system did not overload during the heaviest rains. Both facilities, sited on the bay's edge, could release treated effluent right into its murky waters. This scenario made the most sense in terms of both economy and ecology. The only potential obstacle was David Joseph and his crusade to forbid any wastewater at all from entering the bay.

The Metcalf & Eddy report, with its subversive recommendation buried among pages of technical analysis, was presented to the Arcata city council in March 1974, at the first meeting after Dan Hauser and Wesley Chesbro were elected. Months passed while the complexities of the sewer problem percolated in their brains.

They had plenty of other problems to distract them. In April, Hauser, Chesbro, and Rudi Becking, an HSU forestry professor who also served on the city council, passed a resolution calling for an end to US involvement in the Vietnam War. The members of the conservative contingent in town were outraged and never missed a chance to let the three responsible council members know it. Becking was a World War II veteran, survivor of a brutal Japanese POW camp. Well known as a straight talker with a powerful tendency to piss people off, he seemed impervious to criticism. Hauser and Chesbro, however, felt the sting of some very personal attacks. One night, after a meeting ended, Robin Arkley—the mill owner who'd papered the campus with posters admonishing students not to vote in the city council election—drew the two of them aside. In the midst of a heated

conversation, Arkley flipped open his billfold, revealing a snapshot of Chesbro. “I carry this around,” he announced, “so I can remember who to hate.”

Chesbro was juggling a complicated mixture of loyalties. He’d filed for conscientious objector status and was doing alternative service at the Northcoast Environmental Center in Arcata. His environmentalist friends had serious doubts when he and Hauser began to talk about resisting the state’s sewage plan. The Clean Water Act may not have been perfect, but for activists struggling to clean up polluted waters, it was the best opportunity to come along in years. Some influential environmentalists in town worried that if the city council fought the state, they’d lose that chance.

In early September, after a city council meeting that had gone on past midnight, Chesbro, Hauser, and Alexandra Fairless, Arcata’s first woman mayor (Fig. 2.1), shared a few beers at the Jambalaya. The Jam was a dim hangout just off the plaza, a two-block walk from City Hall. It was the bar favored by college students and others among the younger, longer-haired residents of town. When he wasn’t doing research for the Environmental Center, Chesbro worked as the Jambalaya’s bouncer.

The three of them gathered around a rickety table, exhausted and wired. The meeting at City Hall had been full of intense debate. “Council meetings in those days went on for a long time because of Alex,” remembers Hauser. “She enjoyed engaging people in argument and baiting her opponents.”

Arcata’s City Manager had just informed the council that fighting the state sewage plan would be a mistake. The city would have to bring a legal challenge against Joseph’s Basin Plan, and odds were high they’d lose. If they didn’t jump on the state bandwagon now, they risked losing any shot at the federal money designated for sewage improvements under the Clean Water Act.

Fairless wasn’t strong on the technical details. When Hauser joined the council, she was happy to pass on to him the responsibility to represent Arcata in negotiations over the proposed regional sewage system. But she understood well enough that Joseph’s grand vision of centralized treatment was flawed. The country was in the midst of an energy crisis; long lines formed to get a few gallons of fuel at the local gas stations. A single sewage plant for the Humboldt Bay area would be the biggest energy consumer in the county. The pumps needed to move wastewater over the miles between Arcata and Eureka, and then across the bay to the open ocean, would suck down more power than the busiest lumber mill.

In the late-night dusk of the Jambalaya, the three friends hashed the issue over for the hundredth time. The state refused to consider moving the proposed sewage pipeline in order to prevent development on the pastures that Hauser had worked so hard to preserve as open land. Joseph’s plan looked to be a destructive waste of money and energy. Rasmussen, the resident expert, said all this was unnecessary; they could protect the bay in humbler, less damaging ways.

It’s hard to say exactly when the city council majority decided to fight despite the odds. Maybe the resolve came to each of them separately, on the quiet walk home from the Jam, or in that peaceful instant before they opened their eyes and rolled out of bed the following morning.



**Figure 2.1** Wesley Chesbro, Alexandra Fairless, and Dan Hauser in an Arcata parade early in their tenure on the city council, 1974 or 1975. Photo courtesy of the Alexandra Fairless Campaign Collection, Humboldt State University Library.

What is on the record is that at the next week's meeting, the council voted to direct the city attorney to determine whether Arcata would stand any chance at all in a legal battle with the state. They hired Rasmussen and his colleagues to try to poke more holes in David Joseph's arguments, hoping to sink them completely.

Becking, fearless as usual, sided with the council's young radicals. "If the council has any guts at all," he said, "we should challenge the state."

Part of the reason the city council resented the state's costly regional sewage plan was that Arcata had already sunk serious money into upgrading its treatment plant. In its fifty acres of newly built oxidation ponds, microbes broke down organic matter while winds off the bay helped to keep the water oxygenated. The ponds attracted hundreds of ducks—Arcata's treatment plant was the most popular birding spot in the area—and served the same function as the conventional, high-tech activated sludge treatment systems preferred by the regional board. The city was carrying over \$1 million in bond debt incurred in building the oxidation ponds and installing a chlorination system to disinfect effluent. If forced to join the regional system, Arcata would have to pay millions for its construction and maintenance while continuing to pay off its investment in a local treatment plant rendered useless.

Instead, Arcata hoped to improve its existing plant, while finding a way to recycle the treated wastewater. A fisheries professor from HSU had been

experimenting with raising young salmon and steelhead in treated sewage effluent. The city council hoped the intense use of its oxidation ponds by migrating birds, along with the recycling of effluent in aquaculture, could justify an exemption from the regional project.

Fairless asked state officials to meet with Arcata's city council to discuss alternatives to the regional sewage system. David Joseph attended, along with Robie.

"We hoped we could develop more advanced biological treatment here in town," remembers Fairless. "David Joseph asked what my degree was in, and I told him I was a Home Ec major." Decades later, the memory of Joseph's response still makes her bristle. "When you get your degree in biology," he said, "I'll be glad to discuss this issue with you."

Joseph and his engineer at the regional board, John Hannum, had both helped shape statewide regulations. They were passionate supporters of a rule called the Bays and Estuaries policy, enacted in May 1974, which banned all discharges of sewage to California bays unless the effluent could be shown to "enhance" the waters. (San Francisco Bay, though badly polluted, was exempted from the rule—officially because of its "high tidal exchange" and "the depths of its waters." However, those familiar with the political workings of the time suggest the true reason was that a discharge ban was not remotely possible in such a large, urbanized estuary.)

"Humboldt Bay does not need anything your waste plant can discharge," Joseph told the city council, "including distilled water."<sup>2</sup> If Arcata found a way to meet state water quality standards without joining the regional system, he pledged to have the standards changed to force them into line.

Hauser explained his struggle to keep open space between the cities of Arcata and Eureka. Running a sewage line through the miles of pasture land between the two cities would guarantee the kind of urban sprawl he'd uprooted his family to escape. "The Emperor Joseph sat and listened to my passionate plea," Hauser says. "And he said, 'You can't win.' It was clear that going against him would mean a big fight."

Joseph had grown up on the southern California coast. He witnessed the devastation of marine life choked by pollution from sprawling cities. He had a passion for righting that wrong. His strategy, however, did not take Humboldt's local conditions into account.

The small cities scattered at Humboldt Bay's edge were home to only 40,000 people. Timber and fisheries (and to some extent, the new industry of illegal backwoods marijuana growing) drove the local economy. The bay was alive, hosting rays, halibut, harbor seals, and a commercial oyster industry that provided two-thirds of the oysters harvested in California.

Bob Rasmussen, the marine botanist who'd been among the first to oppose the regional plan, wrote a scathing critique of the state's plan. He pointed out that recent studies by the state Department of Public Health found no significant bacterial contamination from local sewage plants. Runoff from cattle pastures was the major source of the coliform bacteria sometimes found in bay oysters—a problem

that the regional sewage system would do nothing to address. He questioned the supposed economies of a large-scale project. The same kind of facility had been dismissed as far too expensive in the Metcalf & Eddy report only a few months earlier. Arthur Einerfield, an engineer with Metcalf & Eddy, had said that locating a regional treatment plant on the Samoa Peninsula, as the regional board recommended, would court disaster by pumping raw sewage under the bay floor. A pipe failure could make the dire predictions of bay pollution a reality in minutes.

The authors of the Basin Plan claimed that without an ocean discharge, Humboldt Bay waters would soon become oxygen-depleted, making the bay unlivable for fish. They forecast that the bay would experience a deadly syndrome, known to aquatic ecologists as eutrophication. A heavy load of nutrients from sewage would cause a dense algal bloom; masses of algae would die off and sink to the bottom, where the bacteria decomposing their remains would use up all the oxygen in the water. The result would be an underwater dead zone where no aquatic creatures could survive. Eutrophication had been well documented in Chesapeake Bay, Long Island Sound, and other polluted estuaries on the East Coast. But in forecasting the fate of Humboldt Bay, the plan quoted data that seemed to be lifted from a report on the much more urbanized and polluted San Francisco Bay. Very little information on the water quality or ecology of Humboldt Bay existed, and what there was came from studies by Rasmussen and his HSU colleagues. They'd found communities of bottom-dwelling creatures, plankton, and marine plants consistent with a healthy ecosystem.

The bay, Rasmussen argued, was using the nutrients in sewage, which served as a replacement for a vast acreage of vanished salt marsh that once would have enriched the waters with decomposing plants and the feces of hundreds of thousands of waterfowl. The same effluent that nurtured the bay would act as a destructive shock to marine life in the open ocean off the Samoa Peninsula, which was not adapted to high nutrient loads. Milt Boyd, a marine ecologist at HSU who testified against the proposed regional sewage system, agreed.

Looking back, Boyd acknowledges that the HSU scientists of the 1970s had very little evidence for their position. Years later they would learn that the dominant cordgrass in surviving Humboldt marshes was in truth an exotic species, introduced in ballast water from ships that sailed between South America and Arcata in the late 1800s. Later studies would show that healthy salt marsh does act as a nutrient sink during spring and summer, when native plants are growing. Plants die back in the fall, and winter rains wash their remains into the bay where they become a nutrient source.

People on both sides of the argument were describing Humboldt Bay in terms of their own fears and visions. "The 70s was an era when you could say almost anything, because our knowledge base on estuaries was so thin," says Jim Cloern, a US Geological Survey expert who has been studying the shifting ecology of San Francisco Bay since 1976. In 2001, Cloern published an article on the evolving science of eutrophication in estuaries that debunked the notion that all bays could be protected in the same way.<sup>3</sup> He compared conditions in San Francisco Bay to those in Chesapeake Bay, which is far more impaired by eutrophication even

though it carries lower concentrations of nutrients. A number of factors made San Francisco Bay more resilient, among them booming populations of introduced clams and mussels that filter algal cells out of the water, and strong tidal flushing that carries oxygenated water down to the bay's floor.

At the time of Humboldt County's wastewater battle, however, most scientists assumed that all bays and estuaries were pretty much the same, that there was a simple relationship between nutrient load and the syndrome of algal blooms leading to hypoxic waters. Rasmussen and his colleagues argued early on that Humboldt Bay experienced "tremendous flushing action" with the changing tides, which would move nutrient-enriched waters into the ocean and recharge the bay with oxygenated water. Studies by HSU oceanographer John Pequegnat had produced evidence to support that notion, but Joseph found it easy to dismiss.

Joseph had been struggling to get Humboldt Bay communities to clean up their act for years. In 1966, early in his tenure as executive director of the regional board, Joseph issued a cease-and-desist order to push the city of Arcata to install a chlorinator to disinfect effluent at its treatment plant. In 1970, Joseph cracked down on three Eureka property owners, including the Humboldt County Planning Office, for discharge of raw sewage into the northern arm of Humboldt Bay. The regional board had given repeated warnings before issuing a cease-and-desist order. When County Supervisor Don Peterson asked why cease-and-desist orders were being issued when sewer line construction was already under way, Joseph gave a blunt answer: "We don't trust you."

By the mid-1970s, the regional board estimated that 3.5 million gallons of inadequately treated wastewater were dumped into Humboldt Bay daily. Joseph had spent decades jousting with companies and cities that seemed willing to do anything to avoid investing money in cleaning up their pollution. To him, Arcata's arguments against the regional system represented more of the same. Joseph remembered vividly a spill of raw sewage that had burst from a broken pipe in Arcata into the bay in the winter of 1973. Arcata's public works director had found the leak quickly but failed to notify the regional board, or local oyster farmers, of the contamination.

Joseph and his colleagues hewed to the letter of the Bays & Estuaries policy they'd helped to establish. Sewage discharges to California's bays, no matter how well treated, were forbidden unless they could be shown to enhance bay waters. Asked for a definition of "enhancement," Joseph replied, "The ultimate enhancement would be no discharge at all." A few weeks later Joseph provided a definition of enhancement in formal bureaucratese: "A demonstration that the discharge, through the creation of new beneficial uses or a fuller realization, enhances water quality for those beneficial uses which could be made of the receiving water in the absence of all point source waste discharges."

City council members believed that, given time, they could prove enhancement. The regional board, however, refused to give them time. Designing an alternative treatment scheme and proving it would enhance the bay could take years, but the city had only ninety days. If Arcata didn't join with the regional system by

January 1, 1975, it faced a ban on all new building in the city and fines of up to \$6,000 per day.

For a few weeks, the Arcata city council teetered on the brink of rebellion, despite dire warnings from their attorney of the extreme financial consequences of resisting the regional board. In late October, the Arcata *Union* ran a long piece explaining the sewage controversy, along with an editor's note urging readers to absorb it all in order to understand "perhaps the most important [and costly] question ever to face Arcata."

The array of pumps needed to move sewage for miles across flat land and the activated sludge treatment plant itself would have combined to form by far the biggest energy-consuming enterprise in the county. Today, looking back at old newspaper clippings on the issue, it's ironic to see adamant statements by the regional board's representatives on the need for a centralized sewage system quoted next to a photograph of cars lined up to buy gas during the oil crisis of 1973–74, when the oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) inspired in the US a sudden interest in energy conservation.

The stress roiled Hauser's innards. He made regular trips to the Fourth Street Market in Arcata to stock up on antacids. "Leo down at the Fourth Street Market used to tell me I should buy stock in whoever manufactured Roloids," he remembers.

In November, the city reluctantly agreed to comply with the regional board's policy. "I'm convinced the discharge requirements were set just so we couldn't meet them," Hauser told a reporter.

When the Humboldt Bay Wastewater Authority (HBWA) was created in January 1975, Hauser was designated Arcata's representative. The authority hired Winzler and Kelly, a local engineering firm, to draw up a plan for a regional system. At the start, controversy erupted between Arcata and the other HBWA members, which included Eureka, McKinleyville, and Humboldt County. The state had recommended a sewer line running from Arcata along Highway 101 to Eureka. Hauser and McKinleyville's representative, Grant Ramey, wanted an alternative route that would carry sewage from their towns through an interceptor on the Samoa Peninsula directly to the treatment plant, which was to be built on the peninsula near the Simpson Pulp Mill. This scenario would avoid development in the pastures along Highway 101 and save Arcata and McKinleyville hundreds of thousands of dollars. But the HBWA board voted 4–2 for the original state design—motivated in part by the fact that it forced Arcata to help pay for an expensive underwater pipeline that would carry Eureka's waste across the bay to Samoa. See Figure 8.2.

"I don't think [the other HBWA members] meant to," said Ramey, "but they were setting Arcata up, because they had them hooking in and helping Eureka pay for their costs and then pumping it under the bay. The whole system might have run if they had not come up with this. But this infuriated Arcata."<sup>4</sup>

The longer the planning process took, the higher the price tag climbed. When the final design was approved in December 1975, the estimated cost was \$21 million. In the fall of 1976, grants from the federal Environmental Protection

Agency (EPA) and the state came through, enough to cover \$38.5 million in construction costs. By then, however, estimated costs had more than doubled to \$52 million, due to inflation. The HBWA board approved the issuance of \$12 million in local construction bonds. By then, opponents were pronouncing the project's name as *HUB-wah*, in ominous tones that suggested some fearsome, mythical beast.

HBWA was impelled by the powerful forces of bureaucratic inertia and the longstanding assumptions of profit-driven engineers. Much as Arcata's rebels loathed the idea, the construction of the regional sewage plant appeared inevitable.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, R., Robert Rasmussen, Conrad Recksiek, et al. (1974). "Eureka-Arcata regional sewage facility project." Environmental Impact Report **Environmental Research Consultants, Inc., Arcata, California**(Humboldt Room, Humboldt State University Library).

<sup>2</sup> Brisso, P. (1974). "Arcata not needed for wastewater funds to be granted." Arcata Union **October 2, 1974.**

<sup>3</sup> Cloern, J. (2001). "Our evolving conceptual model of the coastal eutrophication problem." *Marine Ecology Progress Series* **210**: 223–253.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, E., Leslie Brunetta (1989). "Wastewater Wars." *Kennedy School of Government Case Program* **C16-89-854.0.**