

San Diego Coastkeeper and CERF File Lawsuit Over SeaWorld's Fireworks Pollution in Mission Bay

A lawsuit seeks to hold SeaWorld accountable for numerous permit violations resulting in "shocking amounts" of toxic pollutants discharging into Mission Bay.

SAN DIEGO, CA, UNITED STATES, March 11, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ --

Following their November, 2024 [Notice of Intent to sue](#) (NOI), San Diego Coastkeeper (Coastkeeper) and the Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation (CERF), represented by Coast Law Group

(<https://www.coastlawgroup.com/>), have filed a [citizen suit](#) enforcement case against SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment, Inc. and Sea World LLC (collectively, SeaWorld) for its multiple, ongoing Clean Water Act violations. The complaint (Civil Case No. 25CV0532 CAB AHG) was filed March 6th, 2025.

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Phillip Musegaas, Executive Director of Coastkeeper.

SeaWorld has repeatedly failed to comply with its Clean Water Act Fireworks Permit and Waste Discharge Permit, resulting in pollutant discharge violations. The lawsuit aims to put an end to these ongoing violations and ensure SeaWorld adopts practices that protect the health of Mission Bay's vital ecosystem and the public.

Background on the Issue

SeaWorld hosts up to 150 fireworks shows annually, with

summer events on a near nightly basis, resulting in the discharge of thousands of pounds of chemical-laden debris directly into Mission Bay. This includes plastic, foil, paper cardboard, sharp wires, shattered caps and ignitors, defective mortars, and shells.



This hazardous debris is often coated with residues of toxic metals like barium, chromium, cobalt, and copper; phosphorus which causes algal blooms, eutrophication, and fish kills; and perchlorate, an oxidizing agent in rocket fuels, explosives, and fertilizers, can severely interfere with iodide uptake in human thyroid glands and adversely affect fish development.

Shocking amounts" of debris recovered from Fiesta Island and the Mission Bay seabed, plus records submitted by SeaWorld, demonstrate that the company fails to follow its own post-event cleanup protocols and does not implement adequate pollution mitigation measures.

Pursuing Legal Action

Coastkeeper and CERF initially filed the NOI to sue in November 2024, giving SeaWorld 60 days to adequately address improper and illegal discharges from both its fireworks displays, and fish and marine mammal tanks. Following the end of the 60-day notice period, Coastkeeper and CERF filed their Complaint in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California on March 6th.

Historical Context for Clean Water Act Permitting for Fireworks Over Water

Thanks to progressive litigation and advocacy work dating back to the early 2000s, Coastkeeper and CERF were integral in requiring Clean Water Act permits for over-water firework displays. These advocacy efforts drove the nation's first permits regulating the discharge of fireworks under the Clean Water Act.

Unlawful Wastewater Discharges

In addition to requiring SeaWorld to comply with fireworks discharge permits, the lawsuit seeks to require SeaWorld to comply with its Clean Water Act waste discharge permit. SeaWorld is permitted to discharge treated wastewater from aquarium tanks into Mission Bay. However, water quality testing shows ongoing exceedances and insufficient reporting of discharges for pollutants such as total coliform, total suspended solids (TSS), copper, and enterococci. The park has been out of compliance with its Waste Discharge Permit for more than 500 days since January 2020.

"SeaWorld's reckless disregard for its environmental obligations threatens the health of Mission Bay and the people and wildlife that rely on it, and contradicts the company's stated mission to conserve wildlife worldwide," said Phillip Musegaas, Executive Director of Coastkeeper. "After years of noncompliance and pollution, we are taking legal action to force SeaWorld to act responsibly."

Holding SeaWorld Accountable

If successful, the lawsuit will force SeaWorld to comply with the discharge limits and laws illustrated in the Clean Water Act. The lawsuit also seeks remediation for damage done to the environment in Mission Bay. In addition to the relief requested in the lawsuit, Coastkeeper and CERF are calling on SeaWorld to transition to non-polluting alternatives, such as drone-based light shows, which the company already has permits for and which produce zero discharge into

Mission Bay.

“SeaWorld has ignored its obligations for too long,” said Livia Beaudin, partner at Coast Law Group, attorneys for CERF. “This lawsuit is about forcing SeaWorld to comply with the law and stop treating Mission Bay as its dumping ground.”

About Coastkeeper:

Founded in 1995, San Diego Coastkeeper safeguards our region’s inland and coastal waters through a strategic blend of community science, education, grassroots outreach, policy advocacy, and legal enforcement of environmental laws. This approach allows us to effectively tackle the most pressing water issues facing our region. For more information, visit sdcoastkeeper.org.

About Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation:

CERF is an environmental non-profit founded in 2008 by surfers in Encinitas, CA. CERF is dedicated to the preservation, protection, and defense of the environment, the wildlife, and the natural resources of the California Coast. To learn more, visit. www.cerf.org.

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