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(03-08) 18:10 PST SANTA ROSA, Calif. (AP) --

Federal authorities are trying to determine if a controversial Northern California conservation group is filing lawsuits that result in small environmental benefits, but bring the group big legal fees.

U.S. Department of Justice officials said Friday that they are reviewing the work of River Watch, an Occidental-based group that has sued several Northern California cities in the last few years, alleging the cities are violating the Clean Water Act.

R. Justin Smith, a lawyer for the federal agency, said the Department of Justice is monitoring River Watch litigation "to determine where there is a pattern of substantial attorney's fees and limited relief" from environmental problems.

River Watch has sued a variety of Northern California cities, including Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, Willits, Fort Bragg, Fortuna and Crescent City.

Officials in some cities have complained that River Watch is more interested in collecting legal fees than in stopping pollution. City officials claim the group has collected at least $350,000 in legal fees from cities since 2000.

River Watch lawyer Jack Silver could not be reached for comment about the federal review, but in the past he has said the group is simply trying to stop pollution.

Some environmentalists have distanced themselves from River Watch, however. A year ago Russian River activist Brenda Adelman resigned from the River Watch board because of Silver's legal activities.

"It just isn't right for someone to line his pockets this way," Adelman said.

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DOJ to investigate River Watch litigation
The Department of Justice said March 7 it would review whether "a pattern of substantial attorney's fees and limited relief" has followed the litigation of Northern California River Watch, a California-based watchdog group that opponents say has filed lawsuits for financial, not environmental, gain.

Willits, Calif., Mayor Karen Oslund asked the Department of Justice three weeks ago to "put a stop to the legal theft of taxpayer funds from our cities" after making a $40,000 settlement with River Watch. River Watch has filed a dozen or more lawsuits against Northern California cities in the past two years, using Clean Water Act provisions to sue cities accused of pollution and collect attorney's fees for settlements or wins in court. River Watch attorney Jack Silver has collected at least $350,000 in attorney's fees since 2000.

Opponents said River Watch files unnecessary lawsuits against cities that are already in negotiations to mend environmental problems. "Just as in every case that I'm familiar with, the city of Willits was already engaged in discussions with state and federal agencies on ways to remedy our problems. Mr. Silver did nothing but review their files and file a lawsuit against us," said Oslund. In her letter to the Justice Department, Oslund wrote, "The only relief resulting from Mr. Silver's efforts is that felt when he is done fleecing your city and moves onto the next!" (Mike Geniella, Santa Rosa Press Democrat, March 8).

Russian River activist Brenda Adelman resigned from the River Watch board one year ago because of her concern over Silver's litigation. Adelman: "It just isn't right for someone to line his pockets this way."

Silver did not comment on the Justice Department review but has said in the past that the group is merely trying to stop pollution (AP/San Francisco Chronicle online, March 8). -- AAF