

Health of Our Creeks

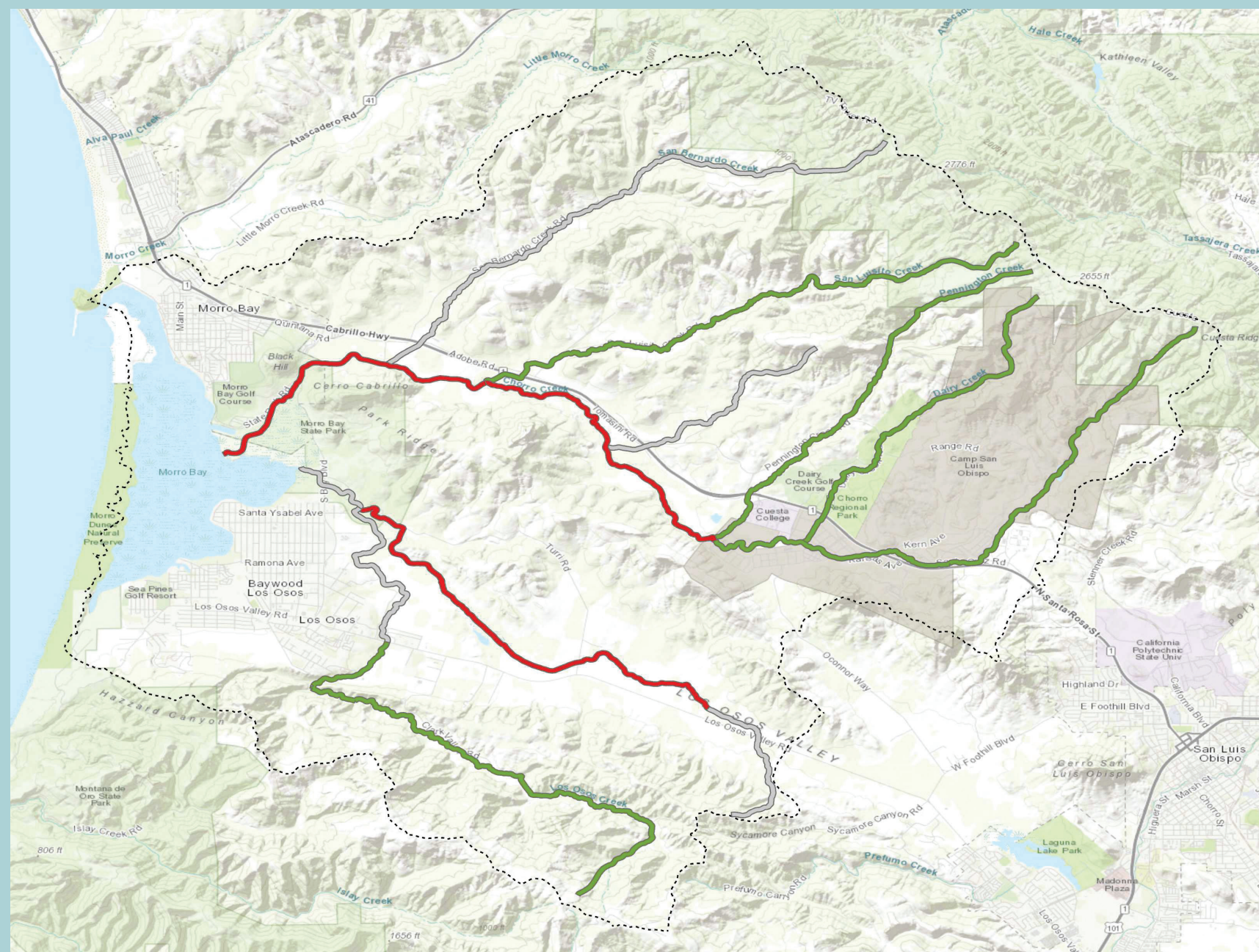
Clean water is important not only for humans but also for the wildlife that call those waters home. To provide healthy habitat, the water must be well-oxygenated and free of pollutants like nutrients and sediment. Estuary Program staff and volunteers have been monitoring the creeks and bay for over twenty years to track long-term conditions.

NITRATE STATUS IN THE WATERSHED



Summary of nitrate data collected from 2002 through 2021 for creeks in the Morro Bay watershed.

While nitrates are essential for plant growth, excess nitrates can cause an imbalance in an aquatic system. In our watershed creeks, nitrate levels were good (low) for upper Chorro Creek, the tributaries to Chorro Creek, and upper Los Osos Creek. Middle and lower Chorro Creek and Warden Creek frequently have elevated nitrate levels, which can make it difficult for sensitive wildlife to thrive. The creek segments that are grayed out show areas where we lack adequate data to make an assessment.

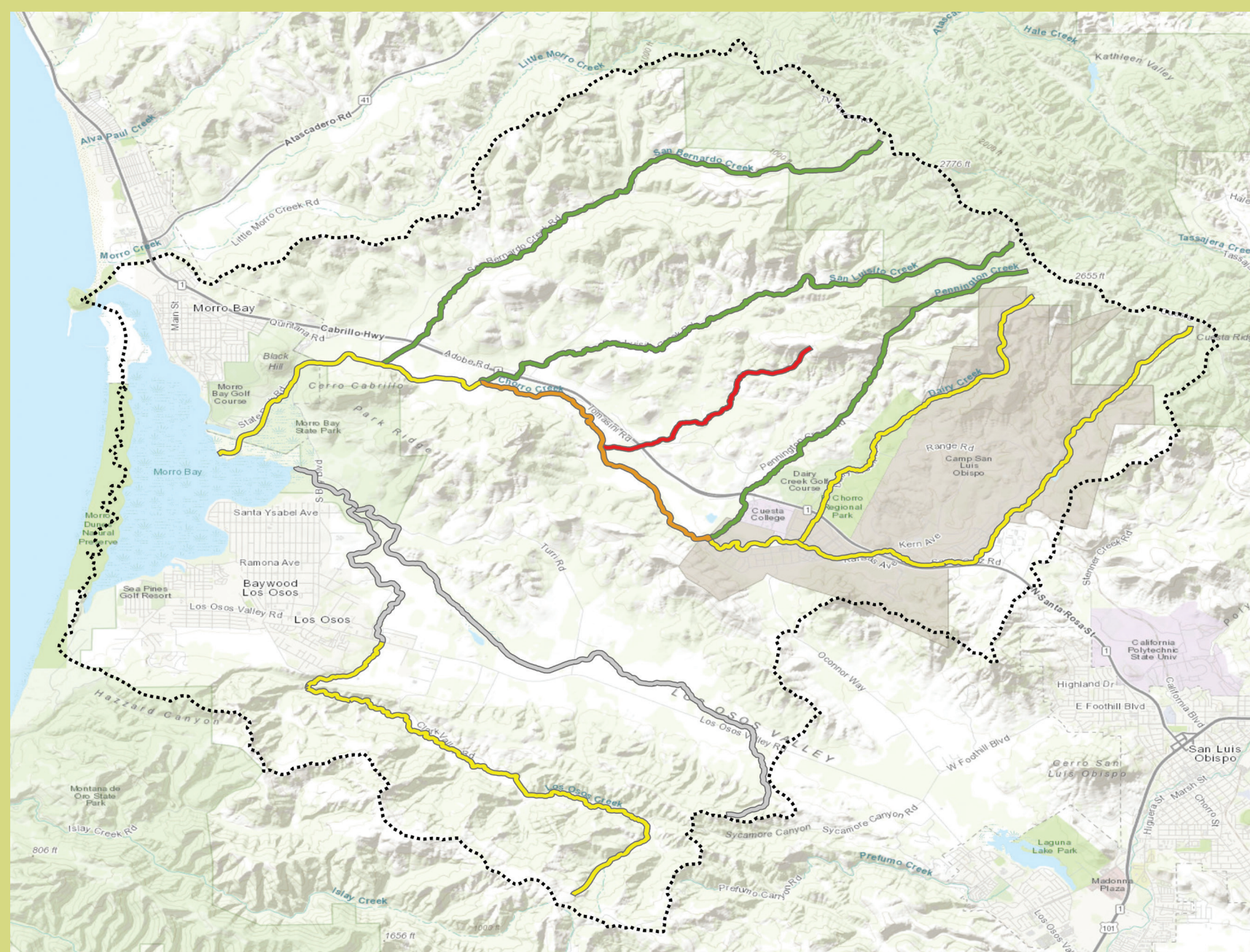


CREEK HEALTH IN THE WATERSHED



This symbol summarizes creek health data from 1994 to 2021 for the watershed. Scores remain stable but we lack data from areas that we suspect are heavily impacted.

Fish and other aquatic life rely on a healthy creek ecosystem. The types of bugs living in a creek give us clues about the water quality. Some bugs are sensitive and can survive only in very clean waters, while other species can tolerate high levels of pollution. Most creeks in the watershed support a healthy diversity of bugs. We have not assessed conditions for lower Los Osos Creek and Warden Creek due to lack of access.



SEDIMENT IN THE WATERSHED

Nearly twenty years ago, the Estuary Program helped purchase and protect 580 acres at the foot of Hollister Peak, which later became known as the Chorro Creek Ecological Reserve. We completed a nearly five-acre floodplain restoration project there in 2019 to reduce the amount of sediment flowing to the estuary and create habitat for sensitive species like steelhead. Floodplains are low-lying areas along creeks that allow water to spread out and slow down during storms. This gives time for sediment, nutrients, and other pollutants to filter out of the water, rather than continuing downstream to the estuary.



The Ecological Reserve was put to the test during a ten-year storm (a storm that happens on average once every ten years) in January 2021 where eight inches of rain fell in a three-day period. The stormwater in the creek was able to spread out and slow down, allowing sediment to filter out before the water continued on its way to the estuary.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Watch what goes down the drains. Avoid over-fertilizing your yard. Prevent soil from washing off your property. These pollutants can make their way from your yard into nearby creeks and the bay, causing problems for wildlife.

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