



For Immediate Release

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Environmental Groups Call for Decisive Action on Agricultural Water Quality Issues

From “America’s Salad Bowl” in the Salinas Valley to the Santa Barbara Pinot Noir vineyards made famous by the movie “Sideways,” the rich soils of the Central Coast region are some of the most intensively cultivated in our nation.

Viable agriculture is key to the economic and environmental sustainability of the Central Coast, but there is a dark side to farming: our waters are polluted by run-off containing fertilizers, pesticides and excess sediment. According to the federal Clean Water Act, our surface waters should be drinkable, swimmable and fishable. But if you live in a Central Coast city your water bill may be hiding a dirty little secret: costly treatment to remove nitrate fertilizers to a level acceptable for drinking. If you live in rural areas and draw from unregulated shallow wells, your water may not be safe to drink or even bathe in. Is anyone up for a dip in the Salinas, Pajaro, or Santa Maria Rivers? And where are the Coho salmon and steelhead runs that once numbered in the millions? They are gone.

The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB, or Water Board) is a state agency with the mandate to improve and protect water quality by regulating sources of water pollution. Monterey Coastkeeper, the Environmental Defense Center and Santa Barbara Channelkeeper are urging the CCRWQCB to take immediate action to protect the Central Coast’s water resources.

On February 1, 2010, the CCRWQCB released “Preliminary Draft Staff Recommendations for an Agricultural Order Conditionally Waiving Individual Waste Discharge Requirements for Discharges from Irrigated Lands,” commonly referred to as the “Ag Order.” The CCRWQCB is proposing to set limits on surface runoff from farms (“tailwater”), discharges to groundwater, and stormwater runoff of sediments. The draft Ag Order sets numeric limits on pesticides, nutrients and other pollutants discharged into waters of the state from farms. By law, these standards must be protective of water quality. The CCRWQCB is also proposing setbacks or buffers between farms and streams, practices that will improve water quality by holding back sediment and biologically breaking down farm chemicals.

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“It’s about time,” said Steve Shimek, Executive Director of Monterey Coastkeeper, “Our water is poisonous, and agriculture needs to clean up its mess. The Water Board has drafted a plan that moves us in the right direction and gives the growers decades to come into compliance. It’s more than fair. Frankly, I am much less patient than the Board, because I see that people are drinking and bathing in tainted water.”

“A strong Ag Order is something we desperately need. The citizens of the Central Coast deserve clean water, and the Water Board has a mandate to protect water quality from harmful pollutants, including those from agriculture. With tighter timelines and the addition of stronger stormwater protections in the draft Ag Order, we will support the staff recommendations,” said Ben Pitterle, Director of Watershed Programs for Santa Barbara Channelkeeper.

“The draft Ag Order largely reflects discussions from a year-long stakeholder process convened by the Water Board in 2009,” said Nathan Alley, a staff attorney at the Environmental Defense Center. “We sat at the table with staff and representatives from various commodity groups to figure out how the Ag Order could best protect both the environment *and* agriculture. With this blueprint, we hope that the integrity of our waters can be restored and that agriculture can become more sustainable.”

For decades farms were allowed to discharge water carrying excess fertilizer, pesticides and sediment loads with little or no oversight or regulatory control. In 2003, California began to regulate agricultural discharges, and growers discharging any harmful substance must now either apply for an individual permit with Waste Discharge Requirements or participate in a group “Conditional Waiver” (the conditions being the discharge requirements applying to all group members).

In the original Conditional Waiver, the CCRWQCB required growers to enroll in a cooperative monitoring program, learn about water quality and create farm water quality plans. But the 2004 Ag Order made few regulatory demands on growers. Growers weren’t even required to monitor the runoff from their own farms. According to the CCRWQCB report released on February 1, 2010, the original Ag Order did little to improve water quality. The new draft is intended to improve upon the old Ag Order, which expires in July 2010.

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The Environmental Defense Center (EDC) is a non-profit public interest law firm that represents community organizations in environmental matters affecting California’s south central coast. EDC protects and enhances the environment through education, advocacy and legal action.

Monterey Coastkeeper (MCK) protects the water, watersheds and coastal ocean for the benefit of wildlife and human populations alike. MCK serves Monterey and Santa Cruz counties including the northern Salinas and Pajaro river basins.

Santa Barbara Channelkeeper (SBCK) is a non-profit environmental organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the Santa Barbara Channel and its watersheds through citizen action, education, field work and enforcement. Channelkeeper has nearly ten years of experience in conducting citizen water quality monitoring activities in agricultural watersheds.