



For Immediate Release – May 12, 2010

For more information contact:

Nathan Alley, Environmental Defense Center, 805/963-1622 x107

Steve Shimek, Monterey Coastkeeper, 831/646-8837 x114, 831/241-8984 cell

Kira Redmond, Executive Director, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper, 805/563-3377

Dipti Bhatnagar, Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, 510/504-2876

## **Conservation and Environmental Justice Groups Call for Decisive Action on Agricultural Water Quality Issues**

San Luis Obispo -- 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 sustainable agriculture is key to the economic and environmental sustainability of the Central Coast, but there is a dark side to farming: our streams and drinking water 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. Is anyone up for a dip in the Salinas, Pajaro or Santa Maria rivers? According to the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB):

Agricultural pyrethroid pesticides in the Central Coast Region and associated toxicity are among the highest in the state. In a statewide study of four agricultural areas conducted by the Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR), the Salinas study area had the highest percentage of surface water sites with pyrethroid pesticides detected (85 percent), the highest percent of sites that exceeded levels expected to be toxic (42 percent), and the highest rate (by three-fold) of active ingredients applied (113 lbs/acre).

No wonder the Coho salmon and steelhead runs that once numbered in the millions are gone.

Pollution is seeping into the ground too. If you live in a Central Coast city your water bill may be hiding a dirty little secret: costly treatment to remove nitrite fertilizers to a level acceptable for drinking. And if you are a low-income farm worker in San Jerardo, these costs are not hidden. The community's original well produces water contaminated by nitrates and 123-trichloropropane, a fumigant used on nearby farms. Community members will now have to pay \$113 per month for water to be pumped uphill from a new well 2 miles away that will tap into a slightly less contaminated area of the aquifer. Yet, this is a temporary solution. If you live in rural areas of the Salinas Valley and draw from unregulated shallow wells, there may be more than a 50 percent chance your water has high nitrites. According to the US EPA:

Infants below the age of six months who drink water containing nitrites in excess of the MCL [drinking water standard] could become seriously ill and, if untreated, may die. Symptoms include shortness of breath and blue-baby syndrome.

The CCRWQCB is the only agency with the authority and mandate to improve and protect water quality by regulating sources of water pollution. Monterey Coastkeeper, the Environmental Defense Center, Environmental Justice Coalition for Water and Santa Barbara Channelkeeper are urging the CCRWQCB to take immediate action to protect human health and the environment.

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.

“It’s about time,” said Steve Shimek, Monterey Coastkeeper, “Our water is poisonous, and agriculture needs to clean its mess up. The CCRWQCB 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.”

“Available water quality data demonstrate that a strong Ag Order is something we desperately need. The citizens of the Central Coast deserve clean water, and the CCRWQCB has a mandate to protect water quality from harmful pollutants, including those from agriculture,” said Kira Redmond, executive director of Santa Barbara Channelkeeper.

“The draft Ag Order reflects a year-long stakeholder process where we sat at the table and figured out how to protect both the environment *and* agriculture.” said Nathan Alley, a staff attorney at the Environmental Defense Center. “With this blueprint, we hope that the integrity of our waters can be restored and that agriculture can become more sustainable.”

“This Ag Order finally connects polluters to the impacts of their pollution,” said Dipti Bhatnagar, Northern California Program Director for the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. “The draft order provides the Board the opportunity to require that polluting agricultural operations take responsibility for their impacts on drinking water and cover the cost to communities.”

###

*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.*

*The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW) is a statewide coalition of over 70 community-based and non-profit organizations working to achieve water justice in California, which is the ability of all communities to access safe, affordable water resources for all beneficial uses.*

###