



**STATE OF CALIFORNIA
CALIFORNIA REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD
CENTRAL COAST REGION**

**PROPOSED DRINKING WATER SOLUTIONS PROGRAM
REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS SUMMARY**

May 26, 2026



Introduction

The Central Coast Water Board is accepting public comments on proposed Order R3-2021-0040-A1 (Proposed Order), as amended by State Water Board Order WQ 2023-0081. This Proposed Order amends Central Coast Water Board Order R3-2021-0040, *General Waste Discharge Requirements for Discharges from Irrigated Lands* (Ag Order 4.0), to incorporate changes responsive to remand directions from the State Water Board in Order WQ 2023-0081.¹ In addition, Order WQ 2023-0081 also directed the Central Coast Water Board to develop an alternative water supply program (AWSP) “*in which dischargers or their third-party representatives provide short-term and long-term alternative water supplies for residents relying on groundwater in areas where the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for nitrate is exceeded as a result of agricultural operations.*”

This document presents an executive summary of the regulatory requirements outlined in the Proposed Order, specifically pertaining to the development of an AWSP. In a separate document, we provide a summary of changes to the Proposed Order related specifically to the remands. This summary does not include all regulatory requirements. Additional details, including the full text of the proposed requirements, are available in the Proposed Order.

This summary has been prepared in advance of a public workshop on June 18, 2026, where staff will present an overview of the Proposed Order. No decisions will be made at this meeting; however, public input will inform ongoing development of the AWSP and the Proposed Order.

Overview of Proposed Compliance Pathways

The Proposed Order requires that dischargers enroll in one of two compliance pathways within the Drinking Water Solutions Program, either the Individual Drinking Water Protection (IDWP) or the AWSP compliance pathway. The AWSP alternative compliance pathway allows AWSP Dischargers more time to comply with the groundwater nitrogen discharge targets and the final receiving groundwater limit but requires that they provide replacement drinking water to residents relying on groundwater that exceeds the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for nitrate as a result of agricultural operations.

The Proposed Order does not require IDWP Dischargers to provide replacement drinking water, but the IDWP compliance pathway has a shorter compliance schedule and IDWP Dischargers must comply with additional extensive individual monitoring and reporting requirements.

¹ Order WQ 2023-0081, *In the Matter of Review of General Waste Discharge Requirements for Discharges from Irrigated Lands Order No. R3-2021-0040 Issued by the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Central Coast Region*, can be accessed via the internet at the following link: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/public_notices/petitions/water_quality/docs/2023/wqo2023-0081.pdf

A summary comparison of the proposed IDWP and AWSP compliance pathways is provided in Table 1, with additional details in the sections that follow.

Table 1. Summary of proposed requirements for IDWP and AWSP Dischargers.

Requirement	IDWP Dischargers	AWSP Dischargers
Required to provide replacement drinking water	No	Yes
Final compliance date (enforceable)	10-years	2051
N target schedule	Accelerated	Extended ¹
New individual monitoring and reporting ²	New elements	No new elements ³
Eligible for 3P-ACP ⁴ benefits	No	Yes
Subject to enforcement for replacement drinking water	Yes	No

¹ Additional extensions granted if Administrative Milestones are achieved.

² Annual ranch-level root zone and ranch-level groundwater monitoring, annual verification of Irrigation and Nutrient Management Plan Summary report data, etc. until compliance is achieved and demonstrated then only annual reporting using one method to confirm compliance.

³ No new individual requirements if a third-party member; third-party administrators may perform monitoring on behalf of AWSP Dischargers.

⁴ 3P-ACP denotes the third-party alternative compliance pathway for groundwater protection.

Compliance with the Final Receiving Groundwater Limit

The Proposed Order requires that all Dischargers comply with the final receiving groundwater limit for nitrate by the applicable deadline for the chosen compliance pathway: 10 years from Proposed Order adoption for IDWP Dischargers or December 31, 2051, for AWSP Dischargers. Dischargers may demonstrate compliance using several methods: (1) Irrigation and Nutrient Management Plan (INMP) Summary – Annual Verification Reports (AVRs); or (2) Ranch-Level Groundwater Monitoring Reports (GMRs); or (3) any other quantifiable and scientifically robust method approved by the Executive Officer. Summaries of the INMP Summary – AVR and the Ranch-Level GMR report methods are provided below.

- INMP Summary – AVRs:
 - Reports that demonstrate that the three-year average of either 1) total nitrogen applied (A), or 2) nitrogen discharge (total nitrogen applied minus total nitrogen removed [A-R]) is less than or equal to 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre per year.
 - INMP Summary data must be verified by a qualified professional who attests that the data used by the Discharger in preparing the INMP Summary report was audited and the information is true, accurate, complete, and consistent with the Ranch’s Farm Plan, based on the available data records.
- Ranch-Level GMRs:

- Reports that demonstrate that, based on three years of semi-annual groundwater monitoring data, the discharge is not causing or contributing to exceedances of the final receiving groundwater limit for nitrate.

After a Discharger demonstrates compliance with the final receiving groundwater limit, they must continue to demonstrate compliance annually via either INMP Summary – AVRs, Ranch-Level GMRs, or by another method approved by the Executive Officer.

For IDWP Dischargers, demonstrating compliance with the final receiving groundwater limit eliminates nearly all individual monitoring and reporting requirements in the IDWP compliance pathway, except for the need to continue to demonstrate compliance annually. It is anticipated that Dischargers who currently apply or potentially discharge less than 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre per year will enroll in the IDWP compliance pathway and immediately demonstrate compliance via INMP Summary - AVRs.

Summary of Proposed IDWP Compliance Pathway Requirements

The Proposed Order does not require IDWP Dischargers to provide interim alternative water supplies (AWS) or complete long-term solution planning and prioritization. As a result, the Proposed Order requires a shorter compliance schedule so that impacts to drinking water are addressed more quickly. Because IDWP Dischargers must meet more accelerated compliance timelines, they are also subject to increased individual monitoring and reporting requirements. These requirements provide feedback on nitrogen discharge reduction efforts and allow the Central Coast Water Board to evaluate progress toward achieving final compliance deadlines. Some of the key requirements for IDWP Dischargers in the Proposed Order include the following:

- 1. Provision of Replacement Drinking Water:** Not required.
- 2. Final compliance deadline for the receiving groundwater limit:** 10 years from the date of Proposed Order adoption.
- 3. Nitrogen discharge target schedule:** Dischargers must achieve the nitrogen discharge (A-R) targets in Table 2, unless they have demonstrated compliance with the final receiving groundwater limit.

Table 2. IDWP compliance pathway Nitrogen discharge (A-R) targets and schedule.

Three-Year Mean Target ¹	Compliance Start Date
400	12/31/2025
300	12/31/2027
200	12/31/2029
150	12/31/2031
100	12/31/2033
50	12/31/2036

¹ Units are in pounds of nitrogen per acre per year and represent all crops grown and harvested on the ranch. For Dischargers that do not have a three-year record for the ranch they are currently operating, target attainment will be based on the verified INMP Summary report data that is available for their ranch.

- 4. Administrative Milestones:** Not applicable to IDWP Dischargers; these milestones only apply to AWSP administrators.
- 5. Individual monitoring and reporting requirements:** IDWP Dischargers must perform the following monitoring and reporting, unless an IDWP Discharger has demonstrated compliance with the final receiving groundwater limit:
 - INMP Certification (annually).
 - Verification of INMP Summary report data (annually).
 - Ranch-level groundwater monitoring (annually).
 - Ranch-level root zone monitoring (annually).
 - A second round of sampling for nitrate in all on-farm domestic and dual-use water supply wells (annually).
 - Submittal of well construction information for all wells on the Discharger's ranch (one-time data collection, annual submittal of information).
- 6. Third-party alternative compliance pathway for groundwater protection (3P-ACP):** IDWP Dischargers are not eligible to participate in the 3P-ACP.
- 7. Cleanup and abatement orders (CAOs) for replacement drinking water:** IDWP Dischargers may be subject to enforcement, including but not limited to, CAOs that require the provision of replacement drinking water if monitoring and reporting indicates that the Discharger is causing or contributing to exceedances of the MCL for nitrate in groundwater.

Summary of Proposed AWSP Compliance Pathway Requirements

The Proposed Order does require AWSP Dischargers to provide interim AWS conduct water quality sampling, and complete long-term solution planning and prioritization. These requirements may be met individually, but the Proposed Order anticipates that most AWSP implementation, including monitoring and reporting, will be carried out through a third-party AWSP administrator approved by the Executive Officer. Because AWSP Dischargers provide replacement drinking water, they are allowed until 2051 to meet the final receiving groundwater limit.

Key requirements for AWSP Dischargers are as follows:

- 1. Provision of Replacement Drinking Water:** In accordance with Order WQ 2023-0081, the provision of replacement drinking water is to be Discharger funded, at least in part. AWSP administrators will establish the fees paid by Dischargers.

2. **Final compliance deadline for receiving groundwater limit:** December 31, 2051.
3. **Nitrogen discharge target schedule:** AWSP Dischargers must achieve the nitrogen discharge (A-R) targets in Table C.1-3 of Ag Order 4.0 (summarized in Table 3). The Proposed Order also defines Administrative Milestones that, if met by the compliance dates, result in an extension to the interim targets (performance-driven targets). Administrative Milestones are listed in paragraph 4 below.

Table 3. Comparison of the targets established in Ag Order 4.0 and the performance-driven targets (contingent on meeting Administrative Milestones).

	Target ¹	Ag Order 4.0 Table C.1-3 Compliance Start Date	Performance-Driven Compliance Start Date ²
Nitrogen Discharge Difference³ $A_{FER} + A_{COMP} + A_{ORG} + A_{IRR} - R =$	400	12/31/2025	12/31/2025
	300	12/31/2027	12/31/2030
	200	12/31/2031	12/31/2036 ⁴
	150	12/31/2036	Not Applicable
	100	12/31/2041	12/31/2043 ⁴
	50	12/31/2051	12/31/2051

¹ Units: pounds of nitrogen per acre per year for all crops grown and harvested on the ranch.

² Performance Driven Target attainment is **based on the three-year mean** nitrogen discharge. For Dischargers that do not have a three-year record for the ranch they are currently operating, target attainment will be based on the verified INMP Summary report data that is available for their ranch.

³ See Proposed Order for complete descriptions of A_{FER} , A_{COMP} , A_{ORG} , A_{IRR} , and R .

⁴ Subject to reevaluation and may change based on discharger-reported nitrogen applied and removed data, new science, and management practice implementation and assessment before becoming effective.

4. **Administrative Milestones:** In addition to the nitrogen discharge targets, the Proposed Order establishes specific AWSP Administrative Milestones. AWSP Dischargers are ultimately responsible for achieving Administrative Milestones. However, third-party AWSP administrators may achieve Administrative Milestones on behalf of enrolled Dischargers.

AWSP compliance pathway Administrative Milestones include:

- Submittal of a proposal for a third-party AWS administrator.
- Funding and implementation milestones for providing interim AWS.
- Funding and implementation milestones for planning and prioritizing long-term drinking water solutions.
- Water quality sampling milestones.

Funding and implementation milestones are based on the estimated need: the number of domestic wells, state small water systems, and public water systems relying on groundwater that exceed the MCL for nitrate as a result of agricultural

operations. Milestones require meeting increasing percentages of the estimated need over 10 years. Need is initially based on the *Central Coast Water Board's Assessment of Interim Drinking Water Needs and Costs in Central Coast Areas Affected by Agricultural Nitrate Groundwater Contamination* (Proposed Order Attachment D).² The estimated need may be updated based on water quality testing and other information acquired during AWSP implementation, following Executive Officer approval of a revised need assessment developed by AWSP Dischargers or an approved AWSP third-party administrator.

5. Individual monitoring and reporting requirements: If Dischargers are participating in, and are members in good standing of, an Executive Officer-approved third-party AWSP, the AWSP administrator may fulfill monitoring and reporting requirements. Dischargers are ultimately responsible for complying with all AWSP compliance pathway monitoring and reporting requirements; however, third-party administrators may conduct the following AWSP monitoring and reporting tasks on behalf of member Dischargers:

- Recurring reporting requirements:
 - Annual reports and updates to the Central Coast Water Board
 - Public outreach work plan (every two years)
- One time reporting requirements:
 - Water quality sampling work plan
 - Interim AWS funding and implementation work plan
 - Long-term drinking water solutions funding and implementation work plan
 - Third-party domestic well and state small water system long-term solution planning and prioritization focus area report
 - Third-party long-term drinking water solution planning and prioritization completion reports
- Optional reports:
 - Third-party interim need assessment update report

6. Third-party alternative compliance pathway for groundwater protection (3P-ACP): AWSP Dischargers are eligible to participate in the 3P-ACP.

7. Cleanup and abatement orders (CAOs) for replacement drinking water: AWSP Dischargers are not subject to new CAOs requiring the provision of replacement drinking water.

² Proposed Order Attachment D is available via the internet at:
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralcoast/board_decisions/tentative_orders/