



Winston H. Hickox
Secretary for
Environmental
Protection

State Water Resources Control Board

Office of Legislative and Public Affairs
1001 I Street • Sacramento, California 95814 • (916) 341-5250
FAX (916) 341-5252 • Internet Address: <http://www.swrcb.ca.gov>



Gray Davis
Governor

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March 5, 2002

THE STATE WATER BOARD SEEKS STATEWIDE INPUT ON CREATION OF CONTROLS FOR AGRICULTURAL RUNOFF

To address a legislative mandate requiring that state water authorities revisit all regulatory waivers by the end of the year, the State Water Resources Control Board is undertaking a nine-month plan to involve growers, environmentalists and all interested parties in the development of measures to control the effects of agricultural runoff. Agricultural drainage has been granted waivers from government permitting requirements for 20 years.

The State Water Board, and its nine regional water boards, will coordinate public workshops in key agricultural areas throughout the state within the next few months. These open forums will help state regulators, in cooperation with growers, to reduce the escape of pesticides, fertilizers and other agricultural to nearby rivers, streams and groundwater sources. This new activity will affect more than 9 million acres of farmland.

"We look upon this as an inclusive and deliberative process that will help resolve a growing environmental concern in our agricultural community," said State Water Board Chairman Arthur G. Baggett Jr. "Those in the agricultural community and in the environmental community have innovative ideas that will help state regulators better manage this problem, and ultimately, protect our state waters."

The California Water Code allows Regional Water Quality Control Boards to issue waivers, instead of permits, to dischargers when the boards find it is in the public interest to do so. Over the years all nine Regional Boards have adopted waivers for certain types of discharges. The return of agricultural irrigation water to surface streams and rivers is among the approximately 40 types of activities treated in this way.

In 1999, Senate Bill 390 (Alpert) amended the Water Code to rescind all waivers by the end of this year except those that the regional boards decided to readopt under new, stricter guidelines.

California Environmental Protection Agency



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"The nine regional boards may take a variety of approaches," Baggett said. "Some waivers will be readopted, others will be replaced by specific or general orders, and some may be regulated in other ways."

The return of agricultural irrigation water to surface water bodies is an issue in many parts of the state, but most particularly in the Central Valley Region. Working cooperatively with farm groups, the Central Valley Regional Board is in the process of designing a monitoring program that will help identify the problem and its sources.

"After sufficient monitoring data have been received and analyzed, new strategies involving waivers and permits can be designed," Baggett said.

Because the issue extends beyond the Central Valley Region, the State Water Board will be actively involved in the process. During the workshops, State Board members will listen to all interested parties, whether from the agricultural, environmental, or business communities, as well as concerned members of the public about how best to embark on the process.

"A well designed monitoring program is clearly the first step," Baggett said. "What form that program takes as well as what follows from that program are yet to be determined and the input of all parties will be vital to those decisions."

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