



Media Release

Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board

Irrigated Lands Order wins approval on Central Coast

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SAN LUIS OBISPO --- Today, the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board voted to adopt an updated Irrigated Lands Order to reduce nitrate contamination in drinking water. The vote was unanimous to support the order.

The Board's action comes after nearly four years of hearings, public comment and workshops on the Order, and several revisions designed to meet the concerns of the agricultural community.

The updated Order is designed to improve water quality and public health protection in areas of heavy agricultural use. It improves accountability through more effective monitoring and reporting of irrigation practices and nutrient use.

"This action is the culmination of an arduous process that included extensive comment from the agricultural community, environmental groups and the public," said Central Coast Water Board Chair Jeffrey Young. "The board's top priority is protecting public health and drinking water sources. We also need to make significant improvements in our creeks and other surface waters. This updated Irrigated Lands Order is an important step toward those goals."

The irrigated lands order addresses the serious and growing problem of nitrate contamination in the region's drinking water. More than 23 percent of the municipal drinking water wells sampled in the Salinas Valley area exceed safe drinking water limits for nitrate, and must be blended or treated to meet standards. In the Santa Maria area, more than 27 percent of the municipal wells sampled exceeded safe drinking water limits.

About 44,000 private wells are not monitored, but are generally drilled in shallow aquifers more prone to nitrate concentrations than the deeper municipal wells.

High concentrations of nitrate in drinking water can trigger a condition that robs the blood of oxygen. Pregnant women and infants are of special concern because a baby's system is not developed enough to compensate for that lack of oxygen.

Studies have shown that most of the nitrate contamination in the wells in irrigated agriculture areas is caused by agricultural practices.

The Irrigated Lands Order also addresses contamination of surface water with the pesticides Chlorpyrifos and Diazinon. Both pesticides have been detected in area waters and found to be the primary source of severe toxicity in surface waters in the region.

The regional board conducted five public written comment periods, seven public workshops and hearings and more than 60 outreach events during the formulation of the Irrigated Lands Order. Staff worked with stakeholders to address concerns and issued a revised draft order five different times with hundreds of changes in response to thousands of comments.

The Order replaces an Irrigated Lands Order approved by the Regional Board in 2004. For the vast majority of farms in the region, the new requirements are similar or less stringent than the previous Order. For about three percent of the region's farms – those that pose the greatest risk to water quality and include about 14 percent of the irrigated acreage – the requirements are stricter.

Those farms that pose the greatest risk to water quality will be required to develop certified Irrigation and Nutrient Management Plans, Water Quality Buffer Plans if they are adjacent to the most critical creeks, and monitor their individual discharge. The Order gives growers flexibility in deciding how to meet the requirements, and encourages cooperative water quality improvement efforts for monitoring and treatment.

Those growers already using effective management practices such as efficient irrigation management and nutrient budgeting techniques may comply with the Order at relatively low cost. The Water Board and other agencies have offered extensive financial assistance to help growers utilize effective management practices, and additional funding will likely continue.

To learn more about the issue, visit:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralcoast/water_issues/programs/ag_waivers/ag_order.shtml

The State Water Resources Control Board's mission is to preserve, enhance and restore California's water resources and ensure their proper allocation and efficient use for the benefit of present and future generations. The Central Coast Water Board's vision is to have healthy watersheds. To learn more, please visit: <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralcoast/>