



Media Release

State Water Board Seeks Public Comment on New Agricultural Water Quality Requirements

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SACRAMENTO -- The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) is seeking public comment on proposed revisions to agricultural waste discharge requirements for the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed, requirements designed to protect groundwater and surface water from pollutants including excess nitrogen and other chemicals in fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides.

California's agricultural industry produces more than 400 commodities at more than 75,000 farms and ranches and is a significant part of the state's economy, providing a large percentage of fruits and vegetables for the nation. Agriculture is especially significant within the Central Valley, where it represents more than seven million acres of irrigated lands, of which approximately one million are in the Eastern San Joaquin Watershed.

Addressing water quality impacts associated with agriculture poses a complex challenge, in part because the same activities that are essential to producing a crucial, reliable food supply, such as pesticide use to control pests, nitrogen to fertilize crops, and irrigation to water crops, also underlie many of the critical impacts. Further, many of the impacts from agriculture are due to historic rather than existing practices. Impacts from agriculture include toxicity in surface water that threatens aquatic species, and salts in groundwater that adversely affect the quality of groundwater for irrigation, municipal, and other uses. An especially significant public health issue, particularly for pregnant women and infants, is drinking water from wells with high levels of nitrates.

The proposed order, if adopted by the State Water Board, would revise the Eastern San Joaquin Agricultural General Waste Discharge Requirements issued by the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Central Valley Water Board) in 2012 and would also serve as precedent for protecting water quality in irrigated lands programs throughout the state.



While the proposed order upholds many of the provisions in the Central Valley Water Board's waste discharge requirements, such as using a structure based on coalitions of farm interests working together to comply with the requirements and using management practices to reach compliance, it adds several significant revisions, including:

- Requiring growers to monitor nitrate levels in on-farm drinking water supply wells.
- Revising the way nitrogen application is recorded and analyzed.
- Starting in 2019, requiring the reporting of management practice data and nitrogen application data to the Central Valley Water Board at the field level, rather than allowing it to be aggregated at the township level. Reporting the field level data to the Board would allow analysis of whether the regulatory program is effective in protecting water quality. The first report to the Central Valley Water Board would be due in 2019 and would include data from the three preceding years.

The proposed revisions are in response to petitions filed with the State Water Board and incorporate recommendations from the statutorily required Nitrogen Tracking Task Force and Agricultural Expert Panel. The reporting of the management practice data and nitrogen application data differs from the Nitrogen Tracking Task Force recommendation and was not specifically considered by the Agricultural Expert Panel. The State Water Board is especially interested in receiving public comments on this revision.

Program Background:

The State Water Board and regional water boards have been working with growers and other interested parties to address the environmental and public health impacts from agriculture, while at the same time ensuring the continued economic viability of agriculture in California. The Central Valley Water Board began regulating agricultural discharges to surface water in 1982 with limited conditions focused on preventing toxicity or excess sediment discharge. In 2003, in response to revisions to legal requirements, the 1982 permit was re-examined and the regulatory strategy was modified to include surface water monitoring to determine if and where irrigated lands might be contributing to water quality problems.

The 2003 waiver also allowed growers to form discharger coalitions, with a third-party representative responsible for grower outreach and education and implementation of program requirements. In 2006, the Central Valley Water Board modified the 2003 waivers to require submission of management plans where water quality problems had been identified.

In 2011, the Board certified an environmental impact report for a long-term irrigated lands program that would address both surface water and groundwater quality protection and proceeded to issue several watershed- or commodity-specific permits. The Eastern San

Joaquin Agricultural General Waste Discharge Requirements were the first of the long-term irrigated lands program permits issued and have been in effect since 2012.

The State Water Board encourages persons interested in agricultural regulatory programs in California to comment on the proposed order. The State Water Board is accepting written public comment through April 8, 2016, and is scheduled to hold a workshop on March 15 or March 16, 2016, to hear oral comment. Details on the written comment period and the scheduled public workshop are available [here](#).

Please see the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document on the [draft order](#).

Interested persons should sign up for [the e-mail distribution list](#). On the Email List Subscription Form webpage under “Legal Notices” check the box next to A-2239(a)(b)&(c) as soon as possible to receive future notices regarding this matter. Additional information is available at the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed Agricultural Order [webpage](#).

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