



Media Release

State Water Board Issues Draft Agricultural Water Quality Order for Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SACRAMENTO -- The State Water Resources Control Board today issued a draft order to revise agricultural waste discharge requirements for growers in the eastern San Joaquin Valley, an action that also would serve as a model for protecting water quality in agricultural areas throughout the state.

The draft order would protect communities that rely on groundwater for their drinking water sources from nitrate contamination, a widespread problem that poses serious public health risks. It also would protect water quality from a host of other chemicals from fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides that can get into surface water and groundwater from agricultural waste.

The State Water Board is inviting public comment on the draft order through December 15, and will hold a public workshop on December 6. The board is expected to consider the order for adoption in January 2018.

The draft order, if adopted by the State Water Board, would revise waste discharge requirements for the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed issued by the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board in 2012. The watershed comprises an area of about one million acres of irrigated agriculture in the eastern San Joaquin Valley.

The draft order modifies an earlier draft issued in February 2016, after taking into consideration public comment and changing several aspects of the original draft. In particular, the new draft order no longer requires submission of farm data to the Central Valley Water Board identifying growers by name and field location.

While the new draft order retains many of the provisions in the Central Valley Water Board's 2012 waste discharge requirements, such as relying in part on coalitions of farm interests to work together to comply with the requirements, it makes several significant revisions, including:

- Revising the way nitrogen application is recorded, analyzed and reported.



- Starting in 2019, requiring the reporting of nitrogen application data and management practices to the Central Valley Water Board on a field-by-field basis. Reporting the field level data to the Board would allow analysis of whether the regulatory program is effective in protecting water quality.
- Unlike in the February 2016 draft order, however, this field level data will be reported to the Central Valley Water Board without the grower's name or field location, in order to provide a level of anonymity for the growers.
- Starting in 2019, requiring growers to monitor and report nitrate levels in on-farm drinking water supply wells, if growers are not already required to do so by law.
- Starting in 2020, imposing the same nitrogen reporting requirements in areas considered low vulnerability for impacts to groundwater as required for areas considered high vulnerability for impacts to groundwater, with some exceptions.

Some of the draft order's revisions are in response to [petitions](#) filed by environmental and community organizations seeking review of the Central Valley Water Board's waste discharge requirements. In addition, some of the revisions incorporate recommendations from a nitrogen tracking task force and an agricultural expert panel convened as a result of legislation (Chapter 1 of the Second Extraordinary Session of 2008 (SBX2 1, Perata)). The task force and expert panel reports and recommendations are [here](#).

Program Background

California's agricultural industry produces over 400 commodities at more than 75,000 farms and ranches and is a significant part of the state's economy. 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. The same activities that are essential to producing a crucial, reliable food supply, such as pesticides used 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.

The water quality impacts from agriculture include toxicity in surface water that threatens aquatic species, and salts and nitrates 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 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 changes 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 permit again to require 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 interested parties to comment on the draft order. The draft order shows in redline/strike-through format revisions made to the first draft order released in February 2016. The draft orders are available [here](#).

The draft order further shows in Appendix A in redline/strike-through format revisions proposed to be made to the 2012 Eastern San Joaquin Agricultural General Waste Discharge Requirements.

The State Water Board is accepting written public comment through December 15, 2017, and is scheduled to hold a workshop on December 6, 2017, 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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