Media Release

State Water Board Adopts Agricultural Order for Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed

Reduces Pollution from Irrigated Agriculture and Orders Drinking Water Testing

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Contact: George Kostyrko
George.Kostyrko@waterboards.ca.gov

SACRAMENTO -- The State Water Resources Control Board today adopted an order revising agricultural requirements for the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed to reduce nitrate contamination of groundwater and surface water.

Following extensive public comment and expert input, the order is aimed at protecting communities that rely on groundwater for their drinking water. Nitrate contamination of drinking water is a widespread problem that poses serious public health risks. Nitrates can also have adverse impacts on surface water and aquatic ecosystems.

The order also directs protections for surface water and groundwater quality from other chemicals, including fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides that many be found in agricultural discharges.

The order revises 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 order also establishes a model for all regional water boards to follow in their subsequent orders to reduce pollutants from irrigated agriculture around the State. The order directs the regional water boards to revise their agricultural orders to incorporate testing of drinking water quality for on-farm wells and address the long-term goal of improving groundwater and surface water quality through monitoring and controlling agricultural practices, specifically nitrogen management.

To improve monitoring of nitrogen impacts, the order directs the regional water boards to require the reporting of nitrogen application to crops from fertilizers, organic soil amendments, and in irrigation water, as well as data on nitrogen removed when crops are harvested and taken from the fields.

For the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed, starting in 2021, the order extends some of the same nitrogen reporting requirements previously only required for areas considered high vulnerability for impacts to groundwater to all agricultural areas, with some exceptions. The order makes other changes to the reporting requirements, including the inclusion of new reporting on potential groundwater loading from nitrogen fertilizer use and targets for groundwater quality.

The order also directs the regional water boards to require that growers report on the management practices they are implementing to control pollutants in addition to the use of nitrogen. Reporting the amount of nitrogen applied and removed, along with management practices, allows analysis by the regional water boards of whether regional regulatory programs are effective in protecting water quality to assure that progress is made.

The Board also required review of how the different regional board approaches to the irrigated lands programs are doing within three years of the date of the order.

To protect people presently using on-farm drinking water wells, starting in 2019, the order requires that growers monitor for nitrate levels in on-farm drinking water supply wells and notify the users of those wells if water is found to be above drinking water standards. This provision will come into effect if there are no statewide programs requiring the testing of domestic wells by January 1, 2019.

Addressing water quality impacts associated with agriculture poses a complex challenge. The same activities that are relied upon in producing an essential and reliable food supply, such as pesticides used to control pests, nitrogen to fertilize crops, and irrigation to water crops, also may have environmental consequences. Further, many of the impacts from agriculture are due to historic rather than existing practices. The order seeks to take advantage of technical advances that allow for more precise use of agricultural inputs to minimize potential overuse of these inputs, which should make California agriculture more sustainable.

Many of the changes the order incorporates are recommendations from the following: 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)]; a Board-adopted Report to the Legislature that made recommendation on how to address nitrates in drinking water, and the Board's previous order from 2013 regarding a petition of the Central Coast Regional Water Board's agricultural regulatory program.

Program Background

California's agricultural industry produces more than 400 commodities at more than 75,000 farms and ranches. A significant part of the state's economy, agriculture is valuable for the food and fiber it produces for people and animals. 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.

At the same time, the water quality impacts from agriculture include toxicity in surface water that threatens aquatic species, and salts, nitrates, and other chemicals 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 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.

Additional information is available at the Eastern San Joaquin River Watershed Agricultural Order webpage.

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