

New Water Quality Effort Targets Growers

Alison Jones, Regional Water Quality Control Board

Changes are afoot in the way the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) will be dealing with agricultural water discharges (tail waters). Local growers may soon be required to implement measures to protect water quality by reducing the amount of pesticides, fertilizers, and sediments in irrigation runoff.

The SWRCB is required by California law to address pollution and waste issues in the State's water. Often, that includes nonpoint source pollution in the form of water discharge and/or runoff from agricultural lands into surface or groundwater. The local arms of the SWRCB, the Regional Water Quality Control Boards (RWQCB) must either issue discharge permits to growers or waive permits under certain conditions.

Prior to January 1, 2003, a 20-year blanket waiver essentially covered all agricultural discharges in the Central Coast Region, explained Alison Jones, environmental scientist with the Central Coast's RWQCB. "In the meantime, we have been working with the agriculture industry towards models of voluntary compliance." However, that blanket waiver expired January 1, 2003, and each RWQCB must develop a replacement that will protect water quality and comply with new requirements for waivers.

Local municipalities like the City of Carpinteria are already required to have a permit for their storm water discharges, and implement programs to improve water quality. In lieu of a permit, agricultural growers will likely be asked to implement voluntary programs, based on the proposed waiver that will go to the Regional Board for approval in May.

"I convened a panel to see what these conditions should be," said Jones, "and we've been working to try and support the voluntary efforts already in place." The draft plan currently include three required elements – a farm plan addressing issues of water quality management of nutrients, pesticides, irrigation, and erosion; approximately 15 hours of continuing education on water quality management; and some kind of monitoring and reporting on implementation and results. These elements must be completed within three years of the adoption of the plan.

This approach is considered a "conditional waiver", because growers will not be required to obtain a permit as long as they address the required elements of the waiver. This approach retains local control, and allows flexibility in implementing the most appropriate water quality improvement measures as identified in the farm plan.

The proposed conditional waiver applies to all irrigated lands used for producing crops, including row, vineyard, field and tree crops, commercial nurseries, nursery stock production and greenhouse operations with soil floors that are not currently operating under RWQCB permits. The RWQCB recognizes that some operations are much less likely to impact water quality than others and is considering a low-threat category that would have reduced compliance requirements.

Details of the monitoring program are still being worked out. Keeping monitoring costs as low as possible while having a program that can show water quality improvement over time are both important considerations. Farmers will have the option of performing individual monitoring or participating in some type of cooperative monitoring, both under strict guidelines of the RWQCB to assure accuracy, consistency and comparability. Cooperative monitoring would be carried out at designated sites throughout a given region, for example the Carpinteria Valley. It is likely that cooperative monitoring will be the least costly alternative, as growers could share the costs.

The efforts of local growers under this waiver could have a positive effect on the Carpinteria Valley, where water quality in the Carpinteria Salt Marsh has been cited for high levels of nutrients (fertilizers) and sediment.

The waiver must be adopted at a public meeting of the Regional Water Quality Control Board before it becomes effective. The proposed date for the meeting is May 13, 2004, at the Regional Board offices in San Luis Obispo. For further information, contact Alison Jones at (805) 542-4646 or visit the Regional Board's website (www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb3).