

# Opposing forces collide at ag-water hearing in SLO

**Sam Womack, Arroya Grande Times Press Recorder, 5-13-10**

Hundreds of people concerned about agriculture's role in clean water packed the San Luis Obispo Elks Lodge meeting room Wednesday.

The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board staff blames agricultural water runoff for such major water-quality issues as "unsafe levels of nitrates," toxicity, pesticides and sediment and has proposed new regulations to address those concerns.

On Wednesday, the board held a public hearing to discuss the proposed water-monitoring rules and decided to have its staff evaluate the alternative plans proposed by environmental groups and the agricultural industry.

Then the staff was directed to work with interested parties to devise a compromise plan to cut down on pollutants, according to David Clergen, a water-quality board representative.

Based on the number of plaid shirts, blue jeans and scuffed boots, the audience appeared to consist mostly of farmers, growers and ranchers from Santa Cruz to Santa Barbara, who hoped to convince the board to work with their industry to draft a new set of regulations.

It was an emotional day, as some speakers fought for their livelihood and others for the right to safe and affordable drinking water.

Their messages were displayed in the form of green buttons that stated, "Don't Waive Agriculture Good-bye!" and blue stickers that said simply, "Clean Water."

Water pollution on the Central Coast is described by the water board's staff as "well documented, severe and widespread."

The Santa Maria River is one of the two main watersheds in the Central Coast region that the water board staff considers "seriously polluted," specifically because of agricultural practices.

To combat high levels of pollutants in rivers and groundwater, the staff's solution is to enact strict runoff-water testing and monitoring regulations on individual farm operations and to require reports, often and detailed, on improvements in fertilizer use and irrigation methods.

Representatives of the agricultural industry came out swinging, with numbers showing growers have been cleaning up and cooperating with the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

They also expressed doubt that the proposed regulations would result in cleaner runoff water and called them time-consuming, expensive, a waste of paper and illegal.

"We've found that each farm's water quality is unique, and conservation-type practices do not resolve water-quality issues," said a technical program manager for a co-operative water monitoring program, speaking on behalf of growers.

The agricultural community outlined its own proposed water-quality regulations that would allow farmers to

take samples and choose the best method for improving runoff water and give them time to see if the new approaches worked.

“Our farm consists of 38 individual ranches, some contiguous, some not,” said a Salinas Valley farmer, who tried to explain the impossible nature of the water board’s proposed regulations.

“I raise over 20 different crops; I have 1,350 different plantings a year. Imagine being required to report every fertilizer application. Now multiply it by all the acres in the region,” he said.

Several grower representatives painted horrific pictures of devastated farmland, especially those with strawberry and vegetable crops, thousands unemployed and the loss of up to \$300 million in revenue on the Central Coast if the water board approves its staff’s recommended regulations.

The environmental groups applauded staff’s recommendation but called for stricter timelines and milestones and a detailed enforcement plan.

“(There are) wells way above the toxic level; we have to stop doing this to people,” said Steve Shimek, president of the Monterey Coastkeeper organization.

The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water focused on communities that have to deal with contaminated water sources and showed that bad water can cause severe health problems and a high cost to residents.

In the proposed regulations, farm operators must also monitor nearby watersheds, surface water and groundwater for high levels of nitrates and other pollutants and submit all data to the water board.

According to the proposed agricultural order, irrigation runoff or the listed pollutants will need to be eliminated within two to six years of the ordinance’s adoption.

Also, growers would have to clear out crops near riparian and wetland habitats and form a buffer to protect those areas.

The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board will hold a public hearing in Watsonville in July to give residents of that area a chance to comment on the proposed regulations.

The current agricultural waiver, or set of water runoff guidelines, will most likely be extended again to accommodate the elongated process, Clergen predicted.