

State should stop the use of oil wastewater for farm irrigation

Jamie Collins, Sacramento Bee, 9-18-16

Collins owns Serendipity Farms and has been farming certified organic vegetables, fruit and herb crops in Monterey County since 2001.

California farmers are nothing if not resilient. We're persevering through a seemingly never-ending drought. We withstood falling prices and national economic turmoil. And still, year after year, our fruits and vegetables feed the country – from Nevada to New England.

But I fear we may not prevail over the risk posed by new plans to expand the use of wastewater from oil production throughout the Central Valley.

By forcing more and more farmers to use oil wastewater, the state puts us in the middle of an impossible decision in a time of limited water supply: Use this waste for critical irrigation or watch our livelihoods dry up.

I became an organic farmer in 2001 and juggled three jobs while tending to my 4 acres at night and on the weekends. I'm proud that we never used any pesticides or any other chemicals to grow our crops. Today, we produce berries, lemons and avocados on 20 acres, but one thing has remained the same – all our fruits and vegetables are still completely free of toxins.

So you can imagine my shock when I heard that oil wastewater for crop irrigation may be moving to more and more farms, yet remains to be fully and independently tested.

California currently produces almost half of all the fruits, nuts and vegetables grown in the United States. Under Gov. Jerry Brown's administration, a growing percentage of our produce in the Central Valley is irrigated with minimally treated oil wastewater.

California farming should protect our environment, public health and the well-being of our communities. That's why my farm joined Protect California Food, a coalition working to halt the use of oil waste for crop irrigation.

We've talked to our neighbors and other residents across the state, and hundreds of thousands agree with a simple principle: Oil waste doesn't belong on our food.

Earlier this summer, we delivered more than 350,000 petition signatures to the Capitol calling on Brown and the State Water Resources Control Board to immediately stop this practice. Oil industry representatives and the local water districts are often quick to say their evaluations show the wastewater is safe, but this ignores how inadequate that testing is.

This limited testing does not look for all 450 chemicals and compounds used in oil production. And these selective procedures leave out a number of chemicals known to cause cancer.

Can these industry executives and public officials say with absolute certainty there are no hazardous chemicals in oil wastewater? No.

I love farming because of the opportunities for innovation, creativity and continuous improvement I know that there are better ways to grow crops for the safety and health of our land, our water and our customers. It's time Brown and the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board start thinking creatively, too.

When our water is dwindling day by day, we can't allow the fossil fuel industry to keep dirtying the supplies we have left. Quick fixes, like watering crops with poorly tested oil wastewater, not only potentially harm the families eating our fruits and vegetables, they also put my farm and my farmers' health at risk.

We need long-term policies and practices that save our water and ensure the safety of our food. Let's protect the backbone of our state's economy and the health of all those who depend on it and stop oil wastewater irrigation.