

## Cleaning Up Water on the Central Coast

### Executive Summary

The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency faces many complex, inter-connected problems when ensuring the harmony of agriculture and water on the Central Coast. While there are many policies in place pertaining to water quality, the current system doesn't allow for new solutions to current problems. Innovative ways to achieve optimal outcomes need to be considered, including public-private partnerships that use market-based incentives, simplifying permit coordination for environmental projects and funding alternative pest control solutions.

### Overview of the Problem

The Pajaro Valley is rich in resources and problems. Seawater intrusion, increased sediment, and contaminated surface water (from nitrates, pesticides and excess nutrients) are threatening some of the most fertile agricultural land in the country. These problems contributed to lower Salinas River being rated the most polluted surface water in the state of California in 2010.<sup>1</sup> While it's easy to evaluate water quality after the fact, it's harder to pinpoint where the problem originated. Non-point source pollution, which often comes from agriculture, is tough to regulate yet a major problem on the Central Coast. Since the Central Coast produces a lot of high value crops, contaminated water is not just a public health issue; it's an economic issue. Yet often times non-traditional restoration attempts to clean up surface and groundwater are met with roadblocks due to the permitting process and zoning laws. In a region where the total agricultural revenue was over \$4 billion in 2011, if the quality of the water doesn't improve, the future of agriculture in the region is in jeopardy.<sup>2</sup>

### Current Policies

While the 1969 Porter-Cologne Act gave the State Board ultimate control over water rights, water quality policy, and the authority to control both point and non-point sources, the State has done little to particularize these rights.<sup>3</sup> Heavily influenced by the Porter-Cologne Act, the national Clean Water Act of 1972 undoubtedly cleaned up the nation's water and had a major impact on point source pollution, yet non-point sources were exempted from permit requirements. The more recent Ag Waiver for the Central Coast sets up different tiers of monitoring based on risk, yet efficacy questions remain as detractors point out the abundance of data already available on the problems.<sup>4</sup> While admirable in scope and goals, an underlying issue with all of these acts is the disincentive system that set up the potential for fines, but offers no real incentives to improve beyond the minimum requirements.

### Policy Recommendations

There are many policies already in place that pertain to agriculture and water on the Central Coast, yet part of the problem is often the complexity and sheer number of regulations pertaining to a single issue, with little flexibility in attaining goals. Creating that flexibility while simplifying reporting and permitting are key in solving the water contamination issues in the central coast. Creating systems that encourage innovative partnering, and market-based solutions, while streamlining permit coordination will offer more nimble and long-term responses to the current water problems in the Central Coast, with greater buy-in when all parties are involved in the solution.

- *Public/Private/Nonprofit Partnerships* – The PVWMA must encourage innovative partnerships like Driscoll's and the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz. These unlikely partnerships can improve conservation and water quality outcomes through appropriate performance-based indicators and incentives more quickly than traditional government channels.
- *Streamline Permit Coordination* – Streamline the permit process for environmental restoration projects, in such a way that encourages growers and conservation organizations to create restoration projects on their lands.
- *Alternative Pest Control Funding* – Research and development for feasible, alternative, less toxic pest control methods are key for keeping contaminants out of the water all together.
- *Price Water to Incentivize Conservation* – Continue the current model of charging different price points for different sources of water, but with the express intent of incentivizing specific behaviors, such as purchasing delivered water or using recycled water.

These recommendations will compliment the current actions of the PVWMA through maximizing market-based approaches and creating flexibility in reaching specific water quality goals.

---

1 California Water Boards (2010) Summary of Toxicity in California Waters: 2001 - 2009

2 Crop Reports for Monterey and Santa Cruz Counties (2011)

3 T. Harter and J. Lund (2012) Addressing Nitrate in California's Drinking Water With a Focus on Tulare Lake Basin and Salinas Valley Groundwater. UCD

4 Dowd, B. et al. (2008) Agricultural Non-point Source Water Pollution Policy: The Case of California's Central Coast. Agriculture, Ecosystems, and Environment.