

Protecting Water quality and Watersheds for All: A Long-term Investment by Central Coast Farmers & Ranchers

Working with environmental groups and regulators is nothing new to Central Coast farmers and ranchers. They already have a long-term commitment and investment in the health of farm lands and water resources. That's why local farmers and ranchers sat together with the Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense Center, UC Davis researchers and the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB) and crafted a piece of regulation that has become an example to districts across the state. Under the Central Coast Conditional Ag Waiver, every farmer irrigating crops for sale is subject to a set of conditions to ensure their operations do not cause or contribute to any downstream water quality problem.

There are five parts to the Central Coast Ag Waiver:

1. Enrollment by irrigated farmers directly with the CCRWQCB
2. 15 hours of water quality education
3. Developing a written farm plan
4. Implementing Management Practices to improve water quality, and
5. Monitoring water quality

Almost 90% of Central Coast growers are enrolled in the Conditional Ag Waiver. To reach 100%, local agricultural associations conduct outreach and education, and the CCRWQCB acts as an enforcer. Additionally, a local group called Monterey Coast Keepers has sent letters to growers they believe are not enrolled in the Ag Waiver.

Investment in Water Quality Monitoring

For the past three years 50 Cooperative Monitoring Program (CMP) locations throughout the Central Coast have been monitored monthly for a range of measures of water quality. This growing database, paid for with assessments from farmers and grant funds, has helped give farmers a general idea of where water quality requires attention. But three years of data doesn't provide much of a reference of environmental change. So farmers have to continue paying for the monitoring even though it can't tell them yet what they should be doing on their own farms. It is still up to each farmer to carefully assess what changes to make and whether they can make them this year or must schedule them in over the next five years.

A Watershed Issue

In some of the natural drainage areas (or watersheds) on the Central Coast farming is the only activity. In those cases, all the farmers pull together as a group to address a water quality concern. In other cases, an individual grower collects more detailed monitoring information from their farms and revises their water quality protection plans accordingly. When farming, urban/ residential and industrial uses are in the same watershed, everything becomes a bit more complex. Water pollutants of concern on the Central Coast including nitrate, ammonia, and chemicals can come from homes, gardens, and other types of businesses other than farming operations. The Conditional Ag Waiver ensures that farmers have a plan for addressing any water quality concerns.

Patience, Time, and Money

Farming is an industry that is just not successful at passing on the increased costs of regulations to its customers. Some say this is because the buyer can always find another farmer. Whatever the reason, it is magnified by the fact that water quality and watershed protection takes a lot of patience, time, and money. Generally speaking, farmers are results-oriented people that like to take care of issues and move on to the next thing. That is a good way to stay in business. Water quality protection takes a slow, methodical, adaptive management approach and a lot of patience from all involved. With the financial investment required for almost any on-farm change, farmers have to be sure the change they make for water quality will also help keep them in business. Farmers are finding solutions for managing tail-water, improving irrigation efficiency, and preventing soil erosion – it just takes time.

As farmers assess their ranches and make plans to invest in change, it is important for the rest of the community to know that this is happening. The farmer you see working as you drive past on your way to pick up the kids or go to the grocery store plays an important role in our local economy and in protecting water quality and watershed health. He or she is making a long-term investment of time and money to protect creeks, streams, and rivers for all.