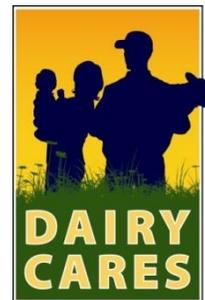


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Badly needed regulatory changes considered for Central Valley water users

California's outdated system for protecting water quality is undergoing an overhaul. For Central Valley water users, this regulatory reform is long overdue. And while the changes that come with it won't be easy, they provide farmers in the nation's top agricultural state a more sensible and balanced approach for farm water use.



In March, one of the state's most powerful water quality agencies—the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Board)—formally initiated action on the Salt and Nutrient Management Plan (SNMP). Ten years in the making, the SNMP calls for a major restructuring of how “discharges” of water are regulated.

A “discharge” occurs anytime water is used and then returned to the environment. A common example is when city residents use water for cooking, cleaning, showers, and sanitation, and then return it, by way of sewers and a waste treatment plant, to the environment. The water is treated to remove most of the pollutants that were added, before being returned to the state's rivers or aquifers. Yet that treated water may still contain small traces of salt, which can be extremely expensive to remove.

Along with cities, food processors and other businesses, farmers—including dairy farmers—are major users of water in the Central Valley. Valley farmers use water to grow food for millions of families in California and around the nation and world. Much of the water goes into the plants, while some evaporates into the atmosphere and some seeps below the soil, to underground aquifers. Water moving below the ground carries small amounts of dissolved minerals—salt—carried to the farm with irrigation water moved from distant mountain ranges or pumped from underground aquifers. Additionally, small amounts of the nitrogen fertilizer used to improve crop production also seep into groundwater. Because virtually all crops today are grown with fertilizer, some seepage is an inevitable outcome of farming, even with technological advancements made over the past century.

Impacts add up

These small impacts, unfortunately, add up across millions of acres. As water users import billions of gallons of water each year, they import with it almost 6 million tons of salt. Much of this salt never leaves the Valley,

accumulating in the soil and aquifers below. As the soil and aquifers become saltier, land suitable for agricultural production is eventually lost. Already, 250,000 acres of Central Valley land have been permanently retired due to salinity impacts, and another 1.5 million acres have been impaired by salt. The impact to the economy has already reached an estimated \$3 billion annually and could grow if nothing is done. At the same time, groundwater resources have been impacted by accumulation of nitrates, a byproduct of agricultural fertilizers, rural septic systems, and other sources, which can threaten drinking water supplies, especially for rural residents depending on wells for drinking water.

Current regulations are intended to protect our water resources for future use, by requiring that water seeping below the surface meet strict drinking water standards. Yet this may not be practical with current technology. So, what can be done to ensure that Californians enjoy both safe drinking water, and crop production that creates hundreds of thousands of jobs and nutritious food for millions of Americans?

A new vision

The SNMP charts a balanced vision for the future, where farmers utilize best management practices to continuously improve groundwater to meet drinking water standards. Because it will take time to reach those goals, the SNMP calls for water users to contribute to a system that ensures safe drinking water for all, from the largest cities to the smallest rural communities and rural residents. To combat the long-term salt problem, planning would begin on developing major infrastructure changes needed to remove more salt from the Valley, returning it to the ocean or to otherwise safe storage.

Instead of asking farmers to do the impossible—either grow crops without fertilizer or meet drinking water standards immediately below their crops—the SNMP asks everyone to do their best now and continue to improve. While this balanced approach makes sense, current regulations don't allow for it. Instead, regulators must require farmers to either meet impractical, even impossible standards, or simply stop farming. The SNMP proposes a way to fix this.

What's next?

The vision of the SNMP is a good one, but there is still a long road ahead. In coming months, the Regional Board will take the concepts in the SNMP and convert them into amendments to its Water Quality Control Plan. These regulations allow creation of “management zones,” where communities work together to improve local water quality, while making sure all have drinking water during the time plans are being carried out.

For this bold new vision to work, cost sharing must be equitable, with everyone doing their part. Success is essential for farmers across the valley, including dairy families, who depend on using both water and fertilizer to grow crops for feeding their cattle.

The SNMP is the product of a 10-year long stakeholder process known as CV-SALTS (Central Valley Salinity Alternatives for Long-Term Sustainability). Dozens of people representing diverse interests from across the Valley have worked hard to craft a vision for a future that, if realized, will allow farming—including dairy farming—to continue in the Central Valley for many decades. With approval by the State Water Resources Control Board and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency scheduled in 2018, the plan could be adopted by the Regional Board as early as next year. It will be the responsibility of all Californians to make sure this bold vision is realized, so that we all can continue to enjoy a safe water supply and plentiful food supply.