

AG REGULATION:

Editorial: Tougher regulation of farm runoff needed
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FOR DECADES, A GAPING HOLE existed in both California and federal regulations to combat water pollution: runoff from farms.

Fortunately, California has made some progress by lifting agriculture's exemption from clean water laws. However, this state has a long way to go in getting farmers to stop polluting streams that flow into the Delta.

Even though the agriculture exemption ended three years ago, many farmers continue to allow pesticides and other pollutants to seep into rivers and the Delta.

State regulators recently have found considerable amounts of pesticide pollution and chemicals that have been banned for more than three decades.

Pesticides were detected at 98 of 107 monitoring stations in the Central Valley. A third of the time, the pollutants exceeded water-quality standards designed to protect fish and people.

Monitoring even found that DDT remains in Central Valley streams a third of a century after it was banned.

The pesticide that most often exceeded water-quality limits was chlorpyrifos, which is banned in urban areas but continues to be used on many farms. The monitoring found that 8 percent of the time, water samples were toxic to aquatic organisms and that sediment was toxic 25 percent of the time.

While the monitoring program is a good start on eliminating water pollution from agricultural runoff, more needs to be done. Under the state program, farmers are required to either join coalitions or to monitor their water quality at their expense.

The problem, according to a February report by the Legislative Analyst's Office is that only 43 percent of Central Valley farms had signed up through coalitions. More are signing up or monitoring

their own farms, but many farmers refuse to participate. That is a situation that must not continue.

There is no doubt that pesticide pollution is a serious problem. Regulators admit that. They are now focusing on just which farms the pesticide is coming from.

Ken Landau, assistant executive officer at the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, says regulators are now testing water to find pollution and then will expand monitoring upstream to pinpoint sources.

Next, farmers will be able to either voluntarily or through regulatory order begin to limit pesticides and other pollutants that flow into rivers and eventually the Delta.

The key to success is to find which farms are sending pollutants into the water. Parry Klassen, chairman of the East San Joaquin Water Quality Coalition, said once it is known exactly where pollution is coming from, it will be possible to address specific problems.

Much work must be done. State regulators still do not know how many farms they are regulating, much less which ones are responsible for pollution.

So far, regulators are simply monitoring pollution and trying to trace their sources. Still no regulations require farmers to reduce pollution.

Many are not cooperating and are not willing to comply with regulators' demands for lists of farm dischargers.

These shortcomings need to be eliminated. The state should mandate all farms to report which pesticides, fertilizers and other potential sources of pollution they use. Limits should be placed on the use of pesticides and fertilizers as well as stiff penalties for water pollution.

It would help if the federal Clean Water Act were amended to include farm runoff, but that is not likely to happen soon.

That means California will have to take full responsibility for controlling agricultural pollution. But it cannot do a credible job until all farmers cooperate with regulators, and specific regulations, backed by penalties, are put in place to control a major source of water