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Press Release

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WATER BOARD ADOPTS ANOTHER WEAK EXEMPTION FOR FARM POLLUTION – VIOLATES PUBLIC TRUST

SACRAMENTO, CA (July 10, 2003) – Today, the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Water Board) voted to readopt exemptions for farm pollution. In spite of a unanimous vote yesterday in which the Water Board rescinded the December waiver, which was tainted by conflicts of interest and procedural irregularities, today's 5-2 vote results in a blatant violation of the public trust and bodes poorly for the condition of California's waters. The decision came out of a two-day public hearing to determine how pesticide discharges from seven million acres of farmland will be controlled.

"The extension of the agricultural exemption is a slap in the face of every Californian who is expected to pay fees and abide by regulatory requirements," said Bill Jennings, DeltaKeeper. "It does not require a single pound reduction in pollutant mass loading."

Over 150 protesters rallied in front of the California EPA Building yesterday to encourage the Regional Water Board's to end farm pollution. A coalition of over 200 environmental, public health, and sportfishing organizations representing more than a million Californians submitted thousands of letters to the Regional Water Board in the last week urging the members to pass stricter regulations to control agricultural waste. The Board veered off schedule yesterday, preventing over 100 members of the public, some of which drove in to the hearing from as far as Bakersfield and Delano, from voicing their concern during the scheduled public testimony period.

"The public voice was loud and clear in its demand for stronger regulations," said Sejal Choksi of San Francisco BayKeeper, organizer of the protest. "The Water Board not only ignored us, but also violated its legal responsibility to the public under California's water quality laws."

At stake was the development of first-ever controls to limit discharges of pesticides, fertilizers, sediment, toxins and other agricultural pollutants that impact water quality. Agricultural runoff is one of the largest sources of water pollution in California and impacts both aquatic ecosystems and human health.

"The Water Board had an historic opportunity to address for the first time the major source of water pollution in the Central Valley and the Central Coast of California," said Linda Sheehan of The Ocean Conservancy. "Unfortunately, they didn't just drop the ball, they gave the ball to polluters, and the public is going to have to force them to tackle the problem."

"The Regional Board is more worried about protecting the agricultural industry from perceived threats to their pocketbooks than about preventing real pollution from contaminating the state's waters," said Michael Lozeau, Earthjustice attorney representing the core groups of the coalition.

Please visit www.cleanfarmscleanwater.org for background information. ###