

Stockton Record
POLLUTION WIDESPREAD IN VALLEY WATERWAYS

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A new assessment of pollution in Central Valley waterways shows that pesticides, heavy metals, salt and bacteria remain widespread problems.

The study is the first of its kind since farmers were made exempt in 2003 from individually reporting the quantities of pollution released from their lands.

That controversial program allows farmers to join coalitions that sample agricultural runoff and release the numbers to the state. This data, collected over a four-year period, is one basis for the state's study, released earlier this month.

A Stockton environmentalist who analyzed the numbers called them an "astonishing and depressing mosaic" affirming that farms should be regulated in the same way as any business or city that discharges pollutants.

"This report puts to rest the repeated claims by farmers that agricultural pollution is not a problem in the Central Valley," said Bill Jennings, whose California Sportfishing Protection Alliance targeted the ag waiver in a lawsuit filed last month.

The numbers are meant to provide baseline pollution estimates that can be used for comparisons in the future. Farmers say they've made dramatic changes over the past three decades in how they apply chemicals.

"The fact that testing procedures are improving means there's a better chance you're going to find something" in the water, said Bruce Blodgett, executive director of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation.

"We have people who are doing a great job out there," he said. "There is no amount of work our farmers and ranchers can do that will satisfy" critics of the ag waiver.

The technical report divides the Valley into four zones and compiles data from thousands of tests and dozens of contaminants. It does not attempt a general evaluation of the state of the waterways.

It does, however, offer clues of problem spots, such as the area of Grant Line Canal near Calpack Road, where pollution standards were exceeded 61 times by toxins ranging from E. coli to pH, salts and heavy metals.

Just north of Stockton, Pixley Slough at Eight Mile Road was a hot spot for the pesticide chlorpyrifos; and 11 out of 14 tests for E. coli were above health standards at French Camp Slough and Airport Way south of Stockton.

Long-outlawed DDT continues to be found in the water as well; Blodgett said farmers are no longer using the chemical.

Jennings' analysis of the statewide report says half of the sites showed toxicity to two or more species. One or more metals exceeded standards in two-thirds of the monitored sites, he said.

Some of those sites, however, may have been tested a dozen or more times with perhaps just one sample exceeding standards.

Still, the numbers are merely a snapshot in time, Jennings said. If there's one positive hit in a waterway, there likely would be others at other times.

Jennings argues that the waiver program prevents the state from learning who is discharging which pollutants and how much, as well as where they are releasing them. Farmers say the waiver allows them to pay a per-acre fee to their coalition while avoiding the costs of individually sampling their runoff.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control board said the study reflected an "admirable effort" by coalition groups and irrigation districts to comply with the waiver program.

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Hot spots

Some areas of concern in the new report:

- Grant Line Canal near Calpack Road: Pollution standards were exceeded 61 times, including E. coli, dissolved oxygen, pH, salt, metals and toxicity.
- Pixley Slough at Eight Mile Road: The pesticide chlorpyrifos was detected above standards 51 times in 347 tests; lead was detected 20 times in 20 tests.
- A drain to Grant Line Canal off Wing Levee Road contained DDT and its breakdown products.
- French Camp Slough at Airport Way: E. coli was detected above health standards 11 times in 14 tests.
- Lone Tree Creek at Jack Tone Road: E. coli was detected above health standards 14 times in 16 tests.
- The Patterson area had high levels of toxic sediment because of pesticide use.