

May 18, 2012

Ben Zabinsky
North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board
5550 Skylane Blvd. STE A
Santa Rosa, CA 95403-1072

RE: NCRWQCB Draft Water Quality Program for Irrigated Agriculture

Dear Mr. Zabinsky,

At the last Mendocino-Sonoma-Marin subgroup meeting held on May 4, 2012 it became apparent that the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board is unable to document the water quality impairments that it assumes to be associated with agricultural operations on the North Coast. Because the lack of a clearly defined scope of these impairments, and the absence of sufficient baseline data to demonstrate improvement of water quality, the goals and outcomes of this program are severely compromised. The agricultural community should not be burdened with defining these unanswered questions through fees and monitoring expenses. Consequently, until these issues are addressed, we, the Mendocino County members of the Mendocino-Sonoma-Marin stakeholders subgroup, are unable to submit comments on the draft scope of the program.

The lack of baseline data for a number of the watersheds within the North Coast region makes it a challenge to determine what the overall water quality issues are and where and/or what their causes might be. More importantly, it also hinders the ability to gauge improvement. In Mendocino County, there are approximately 25,000 acres¹ to 29,000 acres² that are being legally irrigated. This is 1.14% to 1.32% of the 2.2 million acres of land³ within Mendocino County. To pass the burden of defining water quality issues onto a small percentage of the population is unjustified. Monitoring for sediment would be distorted by naturally occurring sources as well as non-point source pollution delivered from other properties, including that from improperly maintained public and private roads--a leading source of anthropogenic sediment delivery on the North Coast. Pesticide and nitrate indicators would be influenced by illegal marijuana production and urban/municipal use within the watershed. Pathogen levels would be influenced by the presence of wildlife and human sources. The cost of monitoring and mitigating for non-agricultural related sources of water quality impairment should not be passed on to the agricultural industry.

As an alternative to a program heavily dependent on monitoring, we suggest a BMP verification program that works toward improvements of controllable sources of potential water quality impairments which may arise from irrigated agricultural lands. A number of thorough, BMP-based programs are already being implemented for numerous management factors, including water quality. Programs such as the Fish Friendly Farming (FFF) Certification, in which the NCRWQCB is involved, encompass 7,964 acres of vineyards and orchards as well as an additional 19,772 acres of open lands with an additional 23,000 acres in the program in Sonoma County. Through the FFF program BMPs have been applied to a total of

¹ Mendocino County 2010 Crop Report (18,639 acres fruit, nut and grapevine+ 6,000 acres of irrigated pasture)

² DWR Irrigated Crop Acres Water Use County Data 2001. www.water.ca.gov/landwateruse/anaglwu.cfm

³ 2010 Mendocino County Census- 3506.34 square miles of land area equals 2,244,058 acres

242 miles of dirt roads and 76 miles of creeks in both counties⁴. The Mendocino County Resource Conservation District (MCRCD) has been addressing TMDLs for sediment in both the Garcia and Navarro River watersheds for over 12 years. MCRCD also provides conservation technical assistance to landowners as does U.C. Cooperative Extension (UCCE). In addition, comprehensive farm planning is offered through the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) with verification of BMPs and project implementation. Other services used by agricultural property owners and managers include certification programs for organic or biodynamic production (30% of all wine grape acreage in the county is certified organic)⁵ and continuing education courses offered by UCCE.

We suggest that you review the Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP), a multi-agency effort to develop a science base to manage agricultural landscapes for environmental quality. Coordinated planning of watershed-scale conservation strategies, socio-economic factors, hydrology, and water quality data is needed prior to establishing any regulatory or fee-based programs. We also suggest that the NCRWQCB continues to work with the SWRCB to implement monitoring through the SWAMP Program in order to define potential water quality impairments. The financial responsibility of defining water quality impairments should be with the Water Boards and not individual industries.

In conclusion, we feel that a number of basic questions need to be addressed prior to moving forward with the Irrigated Agricultural Lands Water Quality Program. It is not feasible to develop a solution for a problem that has yet to be defined. We intend to be engaged in this stakeholder process, but feel that an outcome has already been determined without fully identifying the water quality impairments and all related contributors to these impairments within the diverse watersheds of the North Coast.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide suggestions to this process and encourage you to consider our comments prior to moving forward with the development of the Irrigated Agricultural Lands Water Quality Program.

Sincerely,

Steve Elliott
Potter Valley Irrigation District

Shelley Janek
Mendocino Co. RCD

Devon Jones
Mendocino Co. Farm Bureau

David Koball
Fetzer Vineyards

Glenn McGourty
U.C. Cooperative Extension

Janet Pauli
MCIWPC

Carol Mandel
NRCS, Mendocino County

Chuck Morse
Mendocino Co., Agricultural Commissioner

CC:

Matt St. John, Executive Director NCRWQCB
Sam Magill, Center For Collaborative Policy
Congressman Mike Thompson
Senator Noreen Evans
Assemblyman Wes Chesbro
John McCowen, Chair of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors

⁴ Per Laurel Marcus, Executive Director, California Land Stewardship Institute and FFF Program.

⁵ 2010 Mendocino County Crop Report