

**STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD  
CENTRAL COAST REGION**

**STAFF REPORT FOR REGULAR MEETING OF SEPTEMBER 25-26, 2014**

Prepared on September 17, 2014

**ITEM NUMBER: 22**

**SUBJECT: Central Coast Water Board Strategic Planning Discussion**

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**SUMMARY**

This item provides the Central Coast Water Board an opportunity to review its recent accomplishments, present and future challenges, and discuss future priorities. Current events such as the increasingly severe drought, signing of three landmark groundwater management bills by Governor Brown, and pending renewal of the Irrigate Lands Agricultural Order will likely require significant Central Coast Water Resources in the coming year.

**Major Central Coast Water Board Accomplishments and Challenges**

- **Agriculture Coalition:** The Central Coast Water Board worked to support formation of the first Central Coast Agriculture Coalition for groundwater monitoring. Central Coast Water Board staff continue to use significant staff resources to assist the coalition. The Central Coast staff are using data from the Coalition and other sources to map groundwater quality across the region to identify nitrate risk areas.
- **Ground Water Quality:** Water Board staff have mapped groundwater quality data across the region more comprehensively than ever before to identify nitrate risk areas. These groundwater data help prioritize Water Boards actions and increase focus on the threat to water quality and human health. In response to these data, Water Board staff informed hundreds of well owners about nitrate contamination, and provided information on options to deal with the problem and reduce the risk to human health.

**Grants To Disadvantaged Communities**

- In May 2014, the Central Coast Water Board allocated \$118,000 to the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW) and the Coalition for Urban Rural Environmental Stewardship (CURES) to provide services to disadvantaged communities and low-income farmers. These services include technical support, sampling, and replacement water.
- In July 2014, the Central Coast Water Board provided \$630,000 in funding for services to disadvantaged communities via the Water Board's Groundwater Assessment and Protection program. These funds will be used to sample domestic wells and provide various services to disadvantaged communities, such as technical services regarding drinking water projects, replacement water, and support for Environmental Justice projects.

- **Drought Support to Local Communities:** Water Board staff have prioritized drought related actions to support local municipalities, such as support for the Paso Robles groundwater management district (legislation recently approved by the legislature and the Governor), and support for the Cities of Cambria and Santa Barbara to develop emergency water supplies. Water Board staff continues to expedite permit related actions wherever necessary to support drought related activities and water supplies.
- **Salinas River Management Plan:** Water Board staff are helping Monterey County Water Resource Agency, the Nature Conservancy, and other stakeholders to develop a pilot program for a long-term Salinas River management plan. The Salinas River watershed is the fourth largest in California. This highly complex effort includes water quality, groundwater recharge, flood control, and aquatic habitat issues along almost 100 miles of river corridor and hundreds of private property owners.
- **Healthy Watersheds Assessments:** Water Board staff assessed all watersheds in the Central Coast Region by developing methods to score and evaluate physical, biological and chemical parameters. Staff also developed a web-based report card and a public information web-portal. Other state and federal agencies expressed high interest in this project and are planning to use our tools and format in a broader context (including the California Water Quality Monitoring Council, the State Water Resources Control Board's Office of Information Management and Assessment, and the US Environmental Protection Agency).
- **Grant for Habitat Conservation:** The Central Coast Water Board allocated \$350,000 to the San Luis Obispo County Land Conservancy for the acquisition and preservation of the 900 acre Pismo Persevere, located near Pismo Beach. The Pismo Preserve will be protected from development, and provide public recreational activities and habitat conservation in perpetuity.

### **Challenges That Lay Ahead**

**Drought Crisis:** The drought and the resulting emergency water supply conditions in many communities are a growing, major challenge. Communities such as Cambria, Santa Barbara, Morro Bay, and Los Osos are facing crisis water supply situations. Regional Boards need clear direction to suspend federal and state water quality permitting requirements when necessary to expedite emergency solutions.

**Groundwater Overdrafting:** Overall, the Central Coast relies on groundwater for 86% of its water supply— more than any other area of California. Many communities and farming areas on the Central Coast rely on groundwater for 100% of their supply. Groundwater overdrafting, regardless of the drought, has been a severe and growing problem for decades. Domestic wells are going dry in many areas such as Paso Robles, and seawater intrusion is a critical problem in coastal communities like Soquel and Los Osos where seawater intrusion is advancing 100 feet per year. The drought is highlighting the ongoing groundwater overdraft crisis. Comprehensive groundwater management is a critical need.

**Drinking Water Contamination and Public Health:** Extensive contamination of regional drinking water supplies due to nitrate is an increasing public health risk to rural home owners and small communities, especially disadvantaged communities. In large areas of the Central

Coast, nitrate in domestic wells is several times higher than the drinking water standard. The drought is exacerbating this problem. Extensive funding is needed to provide safe drinking water to these communities.

**Regulation of Irrigated Agriculture:** Irrigated agriculture is responsible for the greatest pollutant loading in the Central Coast Region, causing degradation of drinking water supplies due to nitrate, and degradation of many other beneficial uses. Most of the impaired water bodies in the Central Coast Region are listed because of irrigated agriculture discharges. Regulation of agriculture (Ag) is our biggest challenge in all respects: program management and funding, pollutant loading, environmental impacts, cultural and societal consequences, economic impacts, and political involvement. The use of third party Ag Coalitions provides a service to the industry but also creates significant additional resource demands on the Water Board. Effective implementation of the irrigated lands regulatory program requires significant increases in staff over the next several years. In addition, the Central Coast Ag Order is due for renewal in 2017, which will also require extensive staff resources.

**Regulatory Streamlining:** Over the past 15 years, Central Coast Water Board staff levels have decreased by almost 25%, while the workload greatly increased over the same period. Individual staff are now routinely responsible for hundreds to thousands of discharge cases, especially in the irrigated lands regulatory program. The historical Water Board approach of managing individual discharge cases is no longer possible. The Water Boards must streamline and fully automate their permitting and regulatory processes with on-line enrollment and reporting systems based in sophisticated relational databases that provide comprehensive assessment tools to staff. Staff would then manage the database, prioritize threats to water quality, and take action on the most important cases. This will require substantial investment in the Water Board's information technology (IT) infrastructure and new business practices. One new business practice would be to not significantly increase the number of new dischargers (such as the anticipated grazing requirements) until the IT infrastructure is fully in place to handle the tens of thousands of new dischargers statewide.