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Aggro Action

## Monterey Coastkeeper sues County Water Resources Agency over farming pollution.

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By Kera Abraham



Coastkeeper Steve Shimek stands near the Monterey County Water Resources Agency's Blanco Drain, which conveys ag runoff exceeding state water quality standards to the Salinas River.

The local agency whose mission includes protecting Monterey County's water quality is allegedly polluting the Central Coast, according to a lawsuit expected to be filed Thursday, Oct. 21.

Monterey Coastkeeper, represented by Stanford's Environmental Law Clinic, claims that Monterey County Water Resources Agency "discharged waters with pollutants such as pesticides and nitrates in excess of protective standards, did not file a report of waste discharge, and failed to protect public trust resources" in violation of state law.

MCWRA delivers water from the San Antonio and Nacimiento reservoirs to local growers. It also operates canals that drain ag runoff into the Salinas River and Monterey Bay.

Monterey Coastkeeper Executive Director Steve Shimek says his nonprofit has battled MCWRA over channel maintenance and is currently pushing for disclosure of well monitoring data.

"We've caught them cold on not filing wastewater discharge reports and not meeting discharge standards," he says. "The extent of the pollution from agriculture in Monterey County has become obvious. We're pushing everywhere we can for better regulation."

To that end, Monterey Coastkeeper has joined other environmental groups in pressuring the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board to tighten agricultural discharge regulations.

That might be a more effective target. MCWRA General Manager Curtis Weeks says it's the regional water board, not his agency, that's tasked with maintaining surface water quality. "Most of our authority deals with large storms and floodwater," he says. "I don't know that we have regulatory authority related to agricultural runoff other than what might occur in regards to flood control."

One exception is the Reclamation Ditch between Salinas and Moss Landing Harbor, where MCWRA has "not only authority, but also some responsibility," Weeks says. The ditch drains untreated water from adjacent fields to the ocean. MCWRA also maintains a few small sites for vegetative treatment – and could do more such projects, Weeks says, with voter-approved funding.

(Weeks was not asked to respond to Monterey Coastkeeper's lawsuit because it hadn't yet been filed at press time.)

The plaintiffs hope the suit will force MCWRA into a more proactive approach. "We are not seeking monetary damages," Shimek says. "We are seeking for them to stop polluting. It's that simple."

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