

Many Rivers To Cross

Ag and environmental communities join forces to protect marine sanctuary.

Aug 19, 1999
By by Richard Pitnick



County

Something is killing off marine life along the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, and alarmed scientists are at a loss to explain the reasons why.

Record numbers of gray whales have washed up dead on shore, the sea otter population has declined a startling 12 percent in the past four years, and vital steelhead and salmon fisheries remain at serious risk.

Some researchers attribute the increasing mortality rates to environmental changes from El Nino, others to limitations in the carrying capacity of the bay ecosystem. Still others believe it is sedimentation and pesticide residues like DDT from farming that are the culprit.

To reduce the potential impacts of farming practices that may contribute to the mortality of marine life in the bay, sanctuary officials, beginning next month, will issue and begin implementation of an agricultural water quality plan.

"We don't have an offshore crisis situation like Chesapeake Bay or Santa Monica, but we are seeing some indicators of potential problems like high levels of toxins in sea otter livers and kidney tissue," explains the sanctuary's Water Quality Protection Program Director Holly Price.

"The two most pressing issues are sedimentation, which can be a pollutant by itself by covering spawning grounds and as a carrier of PCBs and persistent pesticides like DDT, which [although no longer used] are still turning up. Nitrates are the other major issue, and we're seeing high surface-water nitrates in the Elkhorn Slough and Pajaro River. What we want is to protect the quality of what we do have offshore."

The sanctuary's ag plan represents more than two years of intensive, coordinated planning between sanctuary officials, environmentalists and representatives from the ag community. The last of three public workshops on the draft plan was held just last week in Half Moon Bay.

Designed to protect and enhance the quality of water that drains into the sanctuary, the so-called Agriculture and Rural Lands Action Plan is the fourth in a series of water quality plans mandated by the sanctuary's designation in 1992. Previously completed water quality plans include urban runoff, marinas and boating, monitoring, and coordination.

Among the many farming practices recommended in the ag plan to help maintain water quality are the use of catch basins for sedimentation and irrigation runoff, vegetation strips to filter sediment, the use of drip irrigation to limit runoff and sedimentation, the use of biological and organic pest controls as an alternative to chemical pesticides, and for ranchers in particular, to control the intensity of grazing.

The plan also emphasizes improving technical assistance and education for farmers, providing funding and economic incentives for conservation measures, better coordinating the existing regulatory system to promote implementation of erosion control practices, and improving maintenance practices for rural roadways and public lands.

Despite the wariness that has long existed between farmers and the environmental community, there are many who believe the sanctuary's ag program will work precisely because farmers have already implemented many of the practices outlined in the plan.

"One thing I'd like to get across is I've been involved in farming all my life and seen a gradual but definite change in our attitudes to environment," says Bob Martin, general manager of Rio Farms, who also serves on the board of directors of the county Farm Bureau. "Whether we realize it or not, we've all become environmentalists in our own way."

From Martin's perspective, the sanctuary's ag plan provides no major challenges to farmers so long as no excessive economic burdens are placed on farmers and the plan is implemented gradually.

"It's mainly just an education process for us as far as mainstream row crop farming is concerned," says Martin. "There won't be a lot of expense in the immediate future, but down the road it's hard to say where this will take us. We can't be complacent, but we don't need to attack it either. [The sanctuary] is not after blood and they want to work with us to come up with common solutions to the problem."

The success of the sanctuary's ag plan will depend in large measure on the commitment made by the six-county Central Coast Farm Bureau Coalition to take a leadership role in establishing networks of farmers and landowners to address water quality issues.

What data currently exists seems to suggest that farmers have already been successful in minimizing farm runoff into the sanctuary.

"The data we have indicates there isn't any measurable damage to the sanctuary because of agriculture," confirms former Monterey County Ag Commissioner Richard Nutter, who currently serves on the sanctuary's advisory council.

"There are some residues from fertilizer nitrates and older pesticides no longer used. Chlorinated hydrocarbons are also very persistent but haven't caused measurable damage seen after the '95 flood when there was major siltation into the watershed. Beyond that we failed to find significant current problems from ag."

All parties to the plan agree that funding will be critical to the program's eventual success, particularly in the areas of data collection and monitoring, something Price admits is already lacking.

"Monitoring in marine waters is less than what we have in the watershed, and while there is data from most of the watersheds, there isn't as much as we would

like," says Price. "In the long run we want to establish a consistent baseline, but unfortunately we don't have a monitoring budget and have to rely on state agencies and regional water quality control boards. We'll have to do this in phases, but as money comes in we'll carry out those strategies. I could see us working on this for at least 10 years."

Building upon the close cooperation between farmers and the environmental community that went into creation of the plan will also be critical to the future success of the program, say farm officials.

"It's necessary when you're trying to move a large, dispersed industry like ag forward in one direction to make sure everyone has a voice," comments Carolyn Richardson, lead environmental attorney for the California Farm Bureau Federation. "I'm pleased where we've come on this, and the net result is a solid foundation now for water quality work."

"It's an exciting time we're entering and I'm hopeful we have the tools to go forward," adds Richardson.

[Send a Letter to the Editor](#) | [Post a Public Forum](#)

[Printer Friendly Version](#)