



November 3, 2008

Lurie keeps a watch on water

Watershed issues are at the forefront

By ROBERT WALCH
For The Salinas Californian

Explaining she wanted to somehow be involved in balancing human and economic needs with environmental protection, Lisa Lurie attended Duke University in North Carolina to get her master's degree in Environmental Management with a focus on watershed management.

Upon her graduation last year, Lurie became the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary's agriculture water quality coordinator.

"I was intrigued by this job because it is housed within a marine resource protection organization, but the position is in close collaboration with and funded by agriculture," she said.

Lurie acts as the coordinator of the Agriculture Water Quality Alliance (AWQA), which is a collaborative effort to adopt conservation practices that improve land management in watersheds that drain to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

A lot of material that comes across her desk she has to share with AWQA members as well as individuals in the ag community.

"We recognize now that growers are caught between a rock and a hard place," Lurie said. "On one hand, they are being asked or required to take actions or implement processes that protect water quality.

"On the other hand, they are facing pressures from their auditors and buyers to implement processes for food-safety programs. At times these two things can be in conflict."

As an example she cited the use of vegetative buffers, which can help filter runoff water but are viewed by some in the produce industry as creating a possible food-safety issue. One group might encourage a grower to create a buffer whereas another will suggest he remove it.

The use of recycled water is another situation where food safety and water quality concerns may be in conflict.

Although recycling cuts down on agricultural runoff that may ultimately flow into the Marine Sanctuary, others feel it may not be safe enough to use on row crops.

Lurie has become involved with the Farm Food Safety and Conservation Network to address some of these issues and help sort out the conflicts.

The diversity and complexity of the issues involving agricultural water quality management and conservation are greater than Lurie realized when she was a graduate student, she said. Her present position has opened her eyes to the extent of this complexity and how much work and collaboration are needed to resolve the problems.

Covers wide area

Lurie said a definite plus of her job has been that the fact that the people she works with are all committed to doing "the right thing."

"We all share the same priorities when it comes to protecting a thriving agricultural area as well as the marine environment and water quality," she said.

Besides the Marine Sanctuary, other partners in AWQA are the National Resources Conservation Service, the six Central Coast resource conservation districts, the University of California Cooperative Extension, the Central Coast Agricultural Water Quality Coalition and local farm bureaus.

Lurie said it's important to think about what flows into the ocean. In the mid 1990s the Marine Sanctuary created a water quality protection program to address possible runoff pollution from various sources.

"My particular role is focused just on agriculture, but we have another program on storm drain runoff," Lurie said. "The program I coordinate covers the 11 major watersheds that drain into the sanctuary. That covers six counties from San Luis Obispo to San Mateo.

"The idea is to develop voluntary strategies to reduce agricultural runoff."

'Voluntary collaboration'

She stressed that all of AWQA's work is non-regulatory. The approach is one of "voluntary collaboration" between landowners, land managers and AWQA.

An Agriculture and Rural Lands Plan lays out the strategies that land managers can use and the services that AWQA can provide to deal with water quality and runoff.

"This is accomplished through education and outreach programs, technical assistance, some funding and cost-share and monitoring," Lurie said.
