

Californians suing state over contaminated groundwater

By Elizabeth Schroeder | 25 January 2024 | 3:18 pm

Some farming communities in California in the US have long been plagued by contaminated drinking water due to nitrates and other contaminants in the groundwater that feed wells in their communities.



Now, the San Jerardo co-operative, 161km southeast of San Francisco, together with environmental organisations are suing the state, and demanding stricter rules about how much fertiliser farmers can use.

“We understand crops need these chemicals to grow, but you don’t need to put that much in the groundwater,” Ileana Miranda, who manages the co-op, told AP News. “It is essentially poisoning the groundwater that we need to live.”

According to the report, much of the nitrate detected in wells today is the result of fertiliser applied decades ago to improve crop yields and quality.

Researchers are as a result warning that the nitrate-laden drinking water, which is associated with a blood disease known as blue baby syndrome in infants and affecting pregnant women, will likely persist for decades.

To address the problem of contaminated water, regional water quality control boards and the State Water Resources Control Board has been trying different approaches for years.

For example, two years ago, the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board instituted regulations to limit the amount of fertiliser that farmers could apply to their crops, as well as protection measures for areas adjacent to streams.

However, earlier this year, the state water board suspended the regulations citing the need for more consistent standards and a scientific review of the situation.

This decision resulted in San Jerardo residents and water quality advocates instituting legal proceedings against the state.

Meanwhile, the Monterey County Farm Bureau filed its own legal action, arguing that neither the state nor the regional board fully considered the economic impact of these changes on farmers, AP News said.

According to Norm Groot, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, nitrogen is vital to ensure the size and quality of items produced in the region, and said that fertiliser application is now far more precise than in the past.

“We just can’t sustain our food supply without some sort of nitrogen application,” Groot said.

“We now have a lot more science that supports when applications are needed, and how those applications can be measured and metered. We’re not using nearly as much fertiliser (as was used) a decade or 30 years ago.”

The litigation was taking place against the backdrop of authorities in California stepping up efforts to [*regulate the use of groundwater*](#) after the state suffered years of drought, while drier winters were also being anticipated in the wake of climate change.

According to AP News, farming played a key role in the state's economy, with strawberry and lettuce production earning the state more than US\$5 billion (about R94,4 billion) in 2021, according to agricultural statistics.

An irrigation and water resource adviser at the University of California, Michael Cahn, stressed that the problem will not be resolved quickly.

"The reality is the value of vegetables is high, and a lot of time it is just easier to put more fertiliser and water on than do careful management.

"We have a lot of contaminated groundwater to use so it will take a long time to clean up. People say this could be 50 years in the future."