

Agriculture no danger to Pajaro water, growers say

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WATSONVILLE — The kind of contamination that is hampering Kesterson Reservoir near Los Banos cannot and is not happening in the Pajaro Valley, farmers and water experts say.

Although there are isolated areas of high nitrates, iron and manganese — which turns water cloudy — “It’s a whole different situation here,” said strawberry farmer Don Driscoll, a Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau director and member of the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

At Kesterson Reservoir, where thousands of wildfowl have been born with gross deformities, some 1,280 acres of shallow ponds store and evaporate agricultural wastewater from the San Joaquin Valley. Experts believe high concentrations of selenium, a naturally occurring element, have caused the tragedy.

Topography, irrigation practices and the amount of agricultural pesticides used in the Pajaro Valley will keep it from becoming another Kesterson, the experts say.

Driscoll said the soils in the Pajaro Valley allow water to percolate into the ground, whereas in the San

Joaquin Valley, the water hits a clay pan and eventually drains into the ponds.

Pajaro Valley farmers irrigate until the water hits the end of a row crop, said apple grower Tom Rider, chairman of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency. In Kesterson, “they irrigate 150 percent,” he said. A thick layer of clay prevents the water from being absorbed, forcing it instead into the ponds.

Farm Bureau President Sherry Mehl said the Pajaro Valley doesn’t

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have the ponding situation seen at Kesterson. “We don’t have upslope drains ... No one is farming on Mt. Madonna that we have to worry about their drain water.”

As to pesticides, Mehl added, “With the cost of pesticides having gone up tremendously, we’re not going to use anymore than we need

to. Pesticide spraying is not something we do on a two-week basis anymore.

“If anything, we’re on the borderline of spraying too little rather than too much,” she said.

Mehl cited a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Study that listed eight toxics found in groundwater.

Of the eight, only one — dibromochloropropane — is used in agriculture, and it was since been banned in California. All the others were so-called “high-tech” contaminants that are plaguing Silicon Valley groundwater today.

Mehl and Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown added that integrated pest management programs, which makes use of predator insects to control pests, are also being used rather than spraying.

Brown noted that agricultural chemical rules “are primarily written to protect the (field) workers and consumers. In doing that, we’re also protecting the groundwater.”