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New Central Coast nonprofit focuses on water quality, access



Chelsea Tu (Courtesy photo)



MONTEREY – A new nonprofit is emerging along the Central Coast with its sights set on ensuring clean, safe drinking water and access to waterways for all, particularly those in disadvantaged communities.

The fledgling nonprofit is called Waterkeeper Monterey, formerly known as Monterey Coastkeeper. Monterey Waterkeeper's Executive Director Chelsea Tu has been at the helm for just a week and is working on forging alliances with community members, as well as other environmentally focused nonprofits and farmers.

Tu told the Herald this week that Waterkeeper will be working with the State Water Resources Control Boards, often just called Water Boards, to limit levels of contaminants in drinking water, mostly in well water that doesn't have the benefit of municipal treatment facilities that urban areas of Monterey and Santa Cruz counties have.

The Water Boards has nine semi-autonomous Regional Water Quality Control Boards, of which the Central Coast is one. The Central Coast regional board runs from the southern tips of Santa Clara and San Mateo counties along the coast down to the northern tip of Ventura County.

Among the biggest culprits contaminating drinking water from wells are nitrates, which are byproducts of nitrogen fertilizer. Another challenge is a chemical called 1,2,3-Trichloropropane, or TCP. The state of California has determined that exposure to infinitesimal amounts of TCP in drinking water – less than one part per trillion – can increase the risk of getting cancer. It is an ingredient in soil fumigants, including Telone, that is used in the Salinas Valley.

Nitrates create their own host of problems in untreated well water, according to the Water Boards. Nitrite can interfere with the ability of red blood cells to carry oxygen to the tissues of the body, producing a condition called methemoglobinemia. It is of greatest concern in infants, whose immature stomach environment enables conversion of nitrate to nitrite, which is then absorbed into the bloodstream and interferes with oxygenating cells and causing the blue



Many growers in the Salinas Valley have adopted new technologies and application methods to limit the amount of nitrogen fertilizer in use, the runoff of which is how water becomes contaminated. Gone are their grandparents' days when the axiom of if some fertilizer is good, then more is better.

Still, the Salinas Valley is dotted with wells that have been tested for nitrates and are more than the 45 milligrams per liter that the Water Boards have set as health standards for nitrate levels. To understand how bad areas of Monterey County are, consider that at least two wells around Soledad have in the past tested more than 300mg per liter of nitrates – more than six times the level considered to be healthy, according to Geotracker GAMA, a state-operated database that allows anyone to search contamination levels in wells.

Monterey County is among the top five counties in the state with excess nitrate levels in well water, according to the Water Boards.

“Groundwater and drinking water nitrate impacts associated with fertilizer nitrogen discharges are particularly significant and problematic in the Central Coast because it is a groundwater-dependent region, relying on groundwater for approximately 90% of its water supply,” according to a Water Boards press release.

Two communities that are among others in the region that have been historically impacted by water contamination are San Jerardo, situated between Salinas and Chualar, and Las Lomas, sandwiched between Watsonville to the north and Elkhorn Slough to the south. They are populated by many low-income, immigrant residents and neither community is hooked up to a municipal water source. Both areas have drawn the attention of state regulators.

Tu herself said she understands this as much as anyone. She immigrated with her family from Taiwan when she was 10 and knows firsthand the struggle of low-income families of color. Tu, who holds both a law degree and a degree in environmental sciences, said making sure that these communities are healthy and have the opportunity to succeed is a motivation for her. Before Waterkeeper, the Seaside resident had worked as a senior attorney for the Central Valley-based Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment.

As Waterkeeper gets rolling, she plans on collaborating with the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board – the regional regulator — for the



“We would like to work with the regional water board and other entities to ensure the timely and effective implementation of Ag 4.0,” she said. “We’ve also petitioned for the board to strengthen the water quality protections and include monitoring requirements and timelines in the order, to ensure that growers reduce polluting the region’s drinking water and waterways as soon as possible.”

Another part of Waterkeeper’s mission is to work alongside other organizations to provide access to the ocean and ocean education for children from low-income families in the Salinas Valley, some of whom have never seen the ocean.

“The Monterey Bay and Salinas Valley regions are some of the most iconic places in the world,” Tu said. “Yet our waterways and drinking water sources are heavily contaminated. My priority is to make sure that all families, including low-income families of color, are able to drink safe, affordable water and enjoy clean freshwater and marine resources that they deserve.”

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