



September 23, 2025

## State Water Board Meets Oct. 8 in Crescent City to Hear Testimony on Pesticide Poisoning of the Lower Smith River

Groups call for large turn-out in opposition to toxic pesticide use on the Smith River Plain.

Contact:

Greg King, Executive Director  
Siskiyou Land Conservancy  
[siskiyouland@gmail.com](mailto:siskiyouland@gmail.com)

Josefina Barrantes  
EPIC  
[josefina@wildcalifornia.org](mailto:josefina@wildcalifornia.org)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

With the pesticide poisoning of California's wildest river now reaching a crisis stage, the California North Coast Regional Water Board (Water Board) has called a special meeting in Crescent City on October 8 to hear testimony from a growing coalition of residents, scientists, and conservation organizations who are seeking the elimination of toxic pesticide use on lands that surround the vital Smith River estuary.

Siskiyou Land Conservancy (SLC) and the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) are encouraging North Coast residents to attend the Oct. 8 meeting and ask the Water Board to require that Easter lily farmers achieve "zero discharge" of all pesticide residues into the Smith River estuary. Currently, the Water Board is creating an "agricultural permit," under the Federal Clean Water Act, that will allow lily farmers to continue polluting the Smith River estuary.

The public is encouraged to attend the Water Board's Oct. 8 meeting at 6 p.m. at the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 981 H Street, Room 100, in Crescent City. The public may also attend and comment remotely at [tinyurl.com/SmithRiverTownhall](http://tinyurl.com/SmithRiverTownhall).

EPIC and SLC are calling for the Water Board to issue the strongest possible prohibitions against pesticide discharge into the Smith River estuary, something the state of California has long refused to do. Instead, said SLC Executive Director Greg King, "for more than two decades the state Water Board has given lily growers a free pass to illegally contaminate the critically important estuary of California's most biologically intact river. Right now, in the Board's newly launched permit process, the state has a chance to finally right this terrible wrong."

Josefina Barrantes, EPIC's Del Norte County advocate, demanded that state officials "finally afford the Smith River estuary the full measure of protection available under state and federal laws, by imposing on lily growers a zero-emission waste discharge requirement. These pesticides are contaminating neighborhoods and schools, and they risk bringing to extinction imperiled species that are protected under both the state and federal Endangered Species Acts. These species include coho salmon, tidewater goby, and eulachon smelt. But these chemicals also threaten to unravel the fragile and delicate aquatic habitat of the entire Smith River estuary."

More than 90 percent of the nation's wholesale crop of Easter lily bulbs is grown on the Smith River Plain, a broad, low-lying expanse that surrounds the Smith River estuary. Decades of water testing in the lower Smith River has demonstrated widespread pesticide contamination in the estuary, and residents and farmworkers in the lower Smith River have been sickened by pesticides. In some years lily farmers apply more pounds-per-acre of dangerous pesticides than anywhere else in California. These chemicals include several carcinogens, including metam sodium and 1,3-dichloropropene (1,3-D). Metam sodium is banned in the European Union, while 1,3-D is banned in the European Union and thirty-four other countries.

The Smith River is California's wildest and most ecologically intact watershed, and it is one of the cleanest rivers in the world. The Smith River contains more miles of stream federally designated "Wild and Scenic" than any other river in the country. The Institute for River Ecosystems, at Cal Poly Humboldt, has identified the Smith River as a "recolonization" source, or seed bank, for Endangered Species in impaired watersheds up and down the California-Oregon coast.

Even federal officials have called on the Water Board to take action. In 2024, Dan Free, the fisheries biologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said that the Water Board has failed to protect the Smith River estuary from pesticides.

"It's intentional," Free said of the Water Board's unwillingness to enforce environmental laws at the Smith River Estuary. "They are protecting the growers, period." Free said he tells Water Board officials, "'Do your job. Don't be an advocate for the farmers.' But that's what they've done all along."

Free believes that lily farming should be banned from lands that surround the Smith River estuary. He said that after "only a couple of inches of total rain the area becomes saturated and cannot hold the water on the land. So it just runs off, with all the chemicals, and as we know any of the buffers are completely inadequate for trying to remove some of that material before it gets to the streams. ... [T]hese places simply aren't suitable [for lily production] because they're wetlands."

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