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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Auburn - While state and federal officials debate the use of chemicals in irrigation water canals, the Placer County Water Agency and its canal water customers are battling algae buildup on water connections in western Placer County.

An ongoing, two-year-old suspension of PCWA's successful algae control program coupled with the onset of warm weather is causing increased growth of the common aquatic weed, said Mike Nichol, the water agency's Director of Field Services.

PCWA halted its chemical weed control program in April 2001 following a Federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling involving an irrigation district in Oregon which, in effect, said that any herbicide use in tributaries to waters of the United States must be governed by a federal permit.

Nichol said this week that after two years without control, algae buildup in the PCWA canal system is as bad as he's seen. The problem is most serious at lower elevations where canal flows are slower, he said.

"As the weather warms up, it's going to get worse," said Nichol, who noted that PCWA already had received more than 150 phone calls from canal water customers with slow or no water flows due to algae.

PCWA customers receive irrigation water through screened orifices, which plug quickly when algae is present. The screens use a fairly fine mesh to reduce particles in the water, and because of that collect algae more rapidly.

Nichol said PCWA canal operators and individual customers are cleaning screens much more frequently, sometimes as often as every two hours.

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“Our canal operations staff is stretched pretty thin,” he said. “We’re trying to do everything we can to help our customers.”

PCWA is encouraging customer assistance in this difficult time. Canal water users are encouraged to clean their own water intakes. Customers are asked to remove algae from the canal and not let it flow downstream where other users would be impacted.

The court ruling affected water suppliers and many other agencies, such as mosquito abatement districts. California water suppliers are working with the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) and the State Water Resources Control Board to develop permit processes.

In the meantime, an effective and customer-supported program of algae control has been shelved. Since 1986, PCWA has used copper sulfate, known as “blue stone,” as a primary method of algae control. It is dripped into canals at low concentrations to control algae but not harm fish. The agency also has suspended use of Rodeo, which is also used to control aquatic weeds.

PCWA chemical use is governed by permits granted by the County Agricultural Commissioner. Agency officials remain concerned that a new level of permitting will be costly to the agency and its ratepayers.

Customers with questions or needing assistance with algae control are invited to contact the PCWA Customer Service Center at (530) 823-4850 or 1-800-464-0030.