Nitrate leaching is a growing concern for farmers and farm managers across the country as fertilizer applications are increasingly scrutinized by public officials. The Des Moines, IA water department has indicated it will sue farmers in three neighboring counties because of the amount of nitrate in the city’s drinking water.

The story is similar in California where, starting last October, vegetable growers must report both the amount of nitrogen applied and the amount of crop uptake to regional water quality control boards. One-third of the domestic and irrigation wells tested in the Tulare Lake Basin and Salinas Valley are above the drinking water standard for nitrate.

Richard Smith, University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) vegetable crops farm adviser based in Salinas, admits that in the past, farmers in the Salinas Valley followed a fertilizer program to ensure the high value, leafy green vegetables they grow will not be short of nitrogen. After all, these vegetables are not called “leafy yellows.” He is part of a team from the University of California–Davis (UC-Davis) developing nutrient and irrigation water management practices.

Better practices to reduce nitrogen leaching

By Cindy Snyder, contributing writer