Growers in California and elsewhere face a dilemma—how do they balance conservation measures that help improve water quality and wildlife habitat with food safety measures that may call for eliminating some of those same practices.

University of California researchers found that 8 percent, or 181 row-crop growers surveyed in spring 2007, had crops rejected by buyers because they used practices to improve water quality and wildlife habitat on the farm.

One respondent, for example, says he lost $17,500 worth of crop because of deer tracks in his field. Another grower reports the buyer rejected his crop due to a potential frog habitat.

Likewise, 15 percent of the growers, managing about 30,000 acres, had removed or discontinued previously adopted conservation practices, including ponds and reservoirs, irrigation reuse systems, and non-crop vegetation buffers such as grassed waterways, riparian habitat, buffer strips and trees.

But the authors of the study—Melanie Beretti, program director of the Monterey County Resource Conservation District in Salinas, Calif., and Diana Stuart, UC Santa Cruz doctoral candidate in environmental studies—say research shows that discouraging or actively removing such conservation practices could actually increase the risk of crop contamination.

"Keeping produce as safe as possible is a critical goal," the authors say. "However, the means to achieve this goal should be carefully investigated to ensure that those measures actually reduce risks of crop contamination, do not increase other human health risks as a result of environmental degradation, and are cost-effective and practical to implement."

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