

Millions set for farmers to improve air quality

By Reed Fujii - Record Staff Writer

Stockton Record, Saturday, January 17, 2009

Federal officials have released \$37.5 million to help U.S. farmers meet federal air quality standards, and a lion's share - nearly \$11 million - will go to California producers.

Rep. Dennis Cardoza of Atwater, who together with fellow Democrat Sen. Barbara Boxer helped get the appropriation included in last year's Farm Bill, said the legislation was crafted to meet the Valley's unique challenges.

"For the first time, the Farm Bill addresses the rural air quality issues that are so prevalent in our San Joaquin Valley," he said Friday.

"We are an extreme non-attainment area for air quality. ... We designed the program to try to meet the extreme needs that we do have in California."

That need is demonstrated, the legislator said, by the fact that two of three farmers seeking conservation assistance historically were turned down due to a lack of funds.

The grant funds will be administered by the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service and funneled through its long-standing Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

"This is a special pot of EQIP money we have for or air quality," said Anita Brown, public affairs director for the conservation service in California.

"It's a pretty good chunk of money, especially in these economic times," she said Friday. "We really do hope that it helps the farmers and ranchers."

It certainly should be a help to San Joaquin County growers, said Kenny Watkins, a Linden walnut, cattle and tomato producer.

"I know we're the largest user of EQIP money in the state," he said Friday.

County farmers and ranchers submit the most applications for grants to help them adopt new equipment and systems to reduce air pollution, said Watkins, also second vice president of the California Farm Bureau Federation.

"We're faced with these new air pollution control regulations. ... The EQIP program makes these new technologies economically feasible for the farmer. It's an incentive to embrace the new technology."

Brown said the new allocation of \$10.9 million comes in addition to \$5 million from regular EQIP funds dedicated to air quality projects, which can include treating rural roads to reduce dust, upgrading farm engines to cleaner models, buying equipment to chip orchard prunings instead of burning and minimizing pesticide sprays.

In San Joaquin County, the biggest effort to improve air quality has gone into programs and equipment that allow farmers to reduce plowing and soil preparation work in their fields, said David R. Simpson, district conservationist in Stockton. This reduces the amount of fine dust and other pollution.

"It's actually been very well-received," he said Friday. "We've signed up in the county something on the order of 48,000 acres in this program."

He said the new federal funds will certainly help clear up the Valley's air in the near term.

"Air quality is better than it was five years ago, and five years from now, it'll be better again. We're heading in the right direction."

More information about the EQIP program is available from the conservation service office at 3422 W. Hammer Lane, Suite A, Stockton, or by telephone at (209) 472-7127.

Federal bucks for farmers to help improve air quality

Manteca Bulletin Tues., Jan. 20, 2009

DAVIS — California will receive \$10,943,940 or about a third of the money newly made available through the federal 2008 Farm Bill to help farmers and ranchers with conservation practices to improve air quality.

The funds will be administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the USDA agency charged with providing technical and financial conservation assistance to private landowners. Funds will be made available through the popular Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that has been operating in California since 1996 and last year provided \$54 million in cost share assistance.

“California has led the nation in pioneering ways to partner with agricultural organizations and regulatory agencies to identify technical and organizational ways to protect the air,” says Ed Burton, State Conservationist of NRCS in California. “I intend to continue the \$5 million in EQIP support of air quality efforts so that the overall funds available for this work should now near \$16 million,” he said. Burton noted that since 2004 NRCS in California has spent over \$21 million on conservation practices to improve air quality including treating rural roads, upgrading farm engines to cleaner models, chipping orchard prunings in lieu of burning, and minimizing pesticide sprays. Since farmers match the federal funds, the total dedicated to air quality activities by the farming community through EQIP is approximately \$42 million.

The \$10.9 million will come through a new subpart of the EQIP program and will be expended through contracts with individual producers. “While we don’t know all the details on how the program will be administered we do hope to augment our strong history of air quality work with new and innovative methods. We are looking to partner with those who have workable ideas for achieving these goals. We all want the air to be clean enough so everyone can clearly see the full splendor of California’s landscapes,” said Burton.

Thirty-six counties are eligible to use the funds to help them come into compliance with standards for PM 2.5 (particulate matter particles smaller than 2.5 microns and associated with health concerns), PM 10.0 and 8-hour ozone levels. The counties are: Alameda, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Contra Costa, El Dorado, Fresno, Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Los Angeles, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, Napa, Nevada, Orange, Placer, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare, Tuolumne, Ventura, Yolo.

Dusty dustup

By Jennifer Wadsworth

Tracy Press, Tuesday, January 13, 2009

Three nonprofits sued the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Friday over its decision to lift obligations from San Joaquin Valley air regulators to cut dust pollution as required under the federal Clean Air Act.

The Latino Issues Forum, Medical Advocates for Healthy Air and the Sierra Club contest a decision made in October 2006 to remove the valley’s designation as a region that violates federal standards for coarse particulate pollution.

The groups argue that the change effectively removes the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District’s obligation to reduce airborne soot, dust and smoke, which the independent California Health Interview survey said kills 1,200 people in the valley every year and causes the

high incidence of asthma in the region. Plus, plaintiffs point out, 1-in-5 kids in the valley air basin suffer from asthma — nearly twice the state average.

Air district and federal officials dismissed the lawsuit, saying that strong winds made local air quality register as "very unhealthy" on a few days since the decision to consider the valley clean enough in terms of larger particulate pollution.

"We did have some very unusual weather that created some windblown dust," said Scott Nester from the air district's office in Fresno.

Though air quality monitors in the valley prove that the area falls short of federal standards, the federal regulators and the local air district argue that the repeated violations are anomalies and don't need more controls to get fixed.

Anything that generates dust, soot or smoke is considered a source of particulate matter pollution, according to federal regulators, who have long warned against exposure to particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter, because it causes respiratory problems, cardiovascular disease and premature death.

The agency in 1987 adopted controls to regulate larger soot, dust and smoke pollution and required regions out of compliance to come up with plans to change that. The valley is one of the worst offenders in the country in terms of both large and small particulate pollution, according to state and federal officials and independent environmental experts.

Yet the federal agency in 2006 and again in 2007 changed the valley's designation as an offender to a region that's up to code.

"This is a classic case of trying to sweep the dust under the rug," said Paul Cort of Earthjustice, who represents the plaintiffs. "The air is not clean, and the agencies have not done their job to protect the public health."

The local air district plans to issue a statement soon contesting the Earthjustice petition. To view the complaint, go to www.earthjustice.org/library/legal_docs/petition-pm-10.pdf.

BUSINESS IN BRIEF

Pork Producers Sue EPA

Washington Post Tues., Jan. 20, 2009

The National Pork Producers Council says it is suing to challenge the Environmental Protection Agency's requirement that livestock farms inform communities about estimated emissions. The rule is scheduled to take effect today. It requires livestock producers to call state and local emergency response authorities to inform them of estimated emissions and to notify them in writing. Farms that fail to comply face penalties of up to \$25,000 per day.

[Manteca Bulletin Commentary Mon., Jan. 19, 2008](#)

Tale of two cities with sugar plants: Manteca & Tracy

By Dennis Wyatt, Managing Editor

Bill Perry was mayor during one of Manteca's darkest moments — the closing of Spreckels Sugar that had served as the symbol, if not the heart, of the city's economic strength for 75 years. Spreckels Sugar and Manteca literally grew up together. There were those who viewed the closure as blasphemy and openly lambasted Perry and the rest of the council for not doing enough to prevent the plant's closure. It didn't matter that the writing had been on the wall for years.

It was getting tougher and tougher for sugar refineries to comply with ever tightening California [air quality](#) laws. Production in the South was much more profitable as there was less overhead.

More than a few looked toward Tracy where Holly Sugar still operated and accused Manteca's leaders of lacking vision.

But Perry stood firm. On the day the four 15-story sugar silos were imploded before 10,000 people to eliminate the most famous part of Manteca's skyline, Perry said he had confidence that Spreckels Sugar would literally arise from its ashes into something even better for the city's economy. Doubters sneered. Eleven years later Perry's words appear prophetic.

Tracy's plant no longer processes sugar. Its silos along Interstate 205 — the main door to Tracy — are not symbolic of anything but blight. Tracy has bought the 1,200-acre ranch where Holly Sugar raised its own beets to the west and south of the silos so the city can expand its wastewater treatment plant.

Today there are no jobs on the old Tracy sugar plant site. In Manteca, more than 1,800 workers are gainfully employed on land that once supported just over 200 jobs. By the time development is complete, the job number is expected to push 2,000.

Manteca is receiving significant property tax and sales tax from the private sector investments at the former 362-acre Spreckels plant site.

And perhaps most important of all, Manteca's front door where Highway 99 and the Highway 120 come together doesn't have four 15-story monuments to blight and economic failure. Imagine what message that would have sent to potential employers.

Spreckels Sugar's transformation was made possible by a public-private partnership. Redevelopment agency loans of over \$5 million — which all has been repaid ahead of schedule — were made to AKF Development to construct infrastructure. The RDA loan was required to make the project a reality for one very big reason — no private sector lender wanted to touch the project with a 1,000-foot pole. There were way too many risks.

The partners in AKF Development blew through \$1 million alone just on required soil tests, gambling they were right in anticipating they'd be no toxics. If any were found, the project was dead and AKF would have probably been history.

Next was the demolition. It was a huge dollar investment and a headache for disposal. But AKF thought out of the box and gave the crumbled concrete silos to a construction firm to use as base to build the sweetest six-lane freeway in California — the stretch between Ripon and Manteca on Highway 99.

The iron went to a mill in Oakland. The bricks were recycled. The lime — which AKF had tried to give to reclamation districts to strengthen levees but discovered federal paperwork would have taken too long — was worked into land throughout the 362 acres.

It was no easy task considering the lime pile — the byproduct of processing sugar beets — had been accumulating for nearly 75 years.

At that point, the developers still didn't have the ability to secure loans for infrastructure. It was too risky for private lenders. That's where Manteca redevelopment came into play.

Manteca today has a front door that's vibrant. Tracy has a closed sugar plant with tall silos and a sewer plant greets travelers along Interstate 205.

Manteca avoided the same fate because they had developers who were willing to risk it all, a redevelopment agency that was able to provide needed financing once the biggest risks were assumed and conquered by AKF, and isn't saddled with a wastewater treatment plant at its next door.

Manteca was indeed lucky to have Mayor Bill Perry at the helm during what was one of the city's darkest hours. Instead of throwing in the towel or bowing to critics who kept slamming RDA investments as evil, Perry helped provide Manteca with new economic direction.

[Bakersfield Californian, Letter to the Editor, Wednesday, Jan. 21, 2009:](#)

Give facts on burn rules

Who and what determines the no-burn rules? Are these numbers and days picked out of a hat? I don't see any meaningful facts to back up all this. Where are the samples taken and by whom? All we get are stories of all the dreadful things that happen when we burn wood.

We get so-called expert studies funded by the Feds. One such study done by David Whitehall claims that lives could have been saved years ago by using some mystical database conjured up by the EPA, whose record of accuracy, as we all know, is spotless.

I see Whitehall has since been rewarded with a job at the Air District -- a little bonus, perhaps, for such a shining report.

He didn't find specific deaths that would have been prevented; instead he jumped to a conclusion to justify his grant money.

Maybe there are fewer deaths because people quit smoking or drove their cars less, thus breathing less toxic fumes.

Don't get me wrong. I am all for having air that is blue instead of yellowish-brown. I just think they could publish some real factual info and maybe some of us would be a little more inclined to accept some of this stuff being foisted on the public.

RICHARD DIURI, Delano