

Valley farmers air concerns to House panel

By Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee
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Help for struggling dairies, incentives for reducing air pollution and support for a legal farm work force are among the items on California agriculture's wish list for the 2012 Farm Bill.

Nearly a dozen farmers testified to members of the House Agriculture Committee during a hearing Monday at the Fresno City Council Chambers.

Several members of the committee, including Reps. Jim Costa, D-Fresno and Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, are on a nationwide tour collecting opinions from farmers on what the new farm bill should contain. The multibillion-dollar bill provides funding for programs that include child nutrition, farm support and conservation.

Farmers who help the state provide a large share of the nation's fresh fruits and vegetables heard May 3 that their requests for help paying for government mandates, such as reducing air emissions, face challenges from some committee members.

Fresno County almond grower Tony Campos wants to nearly triple the \$150 million budget for a program that helps farmers pay for new tractors and other agriculture equipment to meet California's stringent air quality rules.

But Rep. Michael Conaway, R-Texas, said that may be a tough sell as the committee deals with potentially less money.

"We can't drive public policy on what one state does," Conaway said. "We are going to have to make some tough choices."

Issues that transcend California were received more favorably, including the crisis in the dairy industry and the need for a legal work force.

Jamie Bledsoe, a Riverdale dairy operator and president of Western United Dairymen, detailed how high production costs and low dairy prices have put many California dairymen in a financial tailspin for at least the last 18 months.

Bledsoe urged the committee members to create a farm safety net program that looks not just at low milk prices, but also the high costs of grain, forage and energy.

Also gaining attention during the May 3 hearing was a non-traditional farm bill issue — the call for immigration reform.

"For at least the last 12 years, a significant majority of workers who plant, harvest and tend specialty crops and livestock lack proper immigration status," said Jon Reelhorn, a Fresno nursery plant producer.

Modesto tree fruit farmer Paul Van Konynenburg agreed, saying farmers have tried in vain to attract a legal work force. But many legal residents don't want to do the physically demanding job. "The reality is that we have a group of people who want to work, so let's come together to create a program that works for everyone."

Costa said he supports efforts such as the AgJOBS bill, which would create a path to legal residency for more than 1 million illegal farmworkers.

Ranchers, others ask for cattle grazing to return to Bitter Creek

By Doug Keeler
Taft Midway Driller, Tuesday May 4, 2010

Cattle ranchers and their supporters weighed in against both regulations that forbid cattle grazing on the Bitter Creek Wildlife Refuge south of Maricopa and the planning process for a new management plan.

Support from the ranchers included city, county, state, and federal elected officials representing the area.

The planning process has ignored the concerns raised by the ranchers, they say, creating an "anti-rancher, anti-cattle bias."

Concerns about wildfire danger and air pollution were also raised.

All those issues were discussed for more than two and a half hours at a scoping meeting held last week in Taft.

About the only thing that was agreed upon is that the land in the refuge is a valuable resource no matter how you look at it.

"Bitter Creek is a very special place," said United States Fish and Wildlife Service employee Mike Stockton, who manages the refuge. "I want to preserve what we can while we can."

That meeting, conducted by the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, is part of the planning process for a comprehensive conservation plan for the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge complex, a trio of refuges designed to preserve roosting, hunting and breeding areas for the endangered California Condor.

At more than 14,000 acres, Bitter Creek is by far the largest of the three and is located along Soda Lake Road and Cerro Noroeste Road.

Cattle grazing has been banned on the refuge since 2005, said Susie Snedden, who, with her husband Richard, has a ranch with 13 miles of common border with Bitter Creek NWS.

She said the current scoping process is a waste of time and money unless it is done correctly and with rancher input being taken into consideration.

That hasn't happened in the past, Snedden said.

"The scoping process is a waste of time unless we can trust the (USFWS) decisions will be based on sound science and not prejudice," Snedden said.

Since the Bitter Creek management plan was first established in 1984, Snedden said, there has been no update, and cattle grazing was arbitrarily banned in 2005 with no input from ranchers.

That decision could have serious consequences, she warned.

"It was deadly for the plants and wildlife that once thrived on grazed ground but declined on ungrazed ground," she said. "It was also a potentially deadly decision that has created a higher wildfire risk, posing a threat to plants, wildlife and humans alike. I am concerned that the actions of the service have been driven by an anti-cattle, anti-rancher bias."

Stockton said there have only been eight small wildfires since 1987.

Dan Caulfield said the USFWS will get farther faster with their scoping process and land management plan if they work with the cattle ranchers instead of telling them what is going to happen.

"If you come and ask me something, you are going to find a cooperative atmosphere," he said. "You could be getting some very good help."

Cattle have grazed in the area since it was first settled in the 1870s, the ranchers say, and it makes no sense either economically or in terms of biology to continue to ban it.

Grazing the cattle is good for the land, they said, and helps in efforts to eradicate or control nonnative species.

The FWS is proposing to use proscribed burning instead of cattle grazing as a resource management tool, but the ranchers say cattle grazing could accomplish the same thing.

Others, including Kern County Supervisor Ray Watson, Assemblymember Jean Fuller, and Congressman Kevin McCarthy, say burning is the wrong way to go and could exacerbate air quality problems in the Southern San Joaquin Valley.

Fuller sent a letter to notify the FWS "of my continued concerns and to relate the voice of my constituents."

"The proposed proscribed burning by the FWS on the Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge will contribute to the San Joaquin valley's already poor air quality and will go against decades of traditional grazing activity to control growth," Fuller wrote.

Fuller joined McCarthy and Watson in supporting the ranchers' stance and opposing the use of proscribed burning.

McCarthy called for a "full and transparent" planning process with public input and also resubmitted a letter first sent in July 2008.

That letter called on the FWS to take into consideration the "historic, traditional and current role that grazing has played in and around the area for more than a century."

Watson also called for open, public discussion before the management plan is prepared and raised more concerns about proscribed burning.

He recommended a full environmental impact report if burning is to continue as a resource management tool.

Noerr talked at length with USFWS official Tiffany Parsons.

He said it was very positive.

Later, in an email, he encouraged Parsons to take the ranchers concerns into consideration.

"Please remember, you have the ability to turn that entire room full of very well connected and involved people into supporters of your program and its vision if you embrace their concerns and utilize their knowledge and experience to achieve a common goal. Their buy-in is essential to the timely success of this project," Noerr wrote

The fire-versus-grazing question prompted the ranchers to point out that they, too, want to live with the wildlife on the refuge.

The range cattle have also been a benefit to endangered species, they pointed out.

Austin Snedden said cattle have provided an important food source for the condors.

"I have personally witnessed a condor feeding on a stillborn calf on my family ranch," he said. "The loss of a calf is not economically positive, but it is encouraging to see a condor being self-sufficient."

Before the Bitter Creek refuge was established, the condor habitat considered largely of three privately owned ranches – the Snedden, Hudson, and San Emidio ranches, Austin Snedden said.

"I have seen that productive grazing land has provided an ample food source for the California condor and other species," he said. "Five years ago, that resource was removed from the refuge. If we can collaborate with the condor and wildlife, why can't we collaborate with the Bitter Creek administrators?"

Oakland truckers caught up in red tape, finger-pointing

By Cecily Burt, Oakland Tribune

Contra Costa Times & Tri-Valley Herald, Tuesday, May 4, 2010

OAKLAND — Red tape. Finger-pointing. Some Port of Oakland truckers are stuck in the middle of what is becoming a struggle to survive.

About 500 truckers who have failed to meet an April 30 deadline to have new diesel particulate filters installed on their rigs were shut out of the Port of Oakland marine terminals Monday. But they weren't the only ones.

Many drivers whose filter deadlines were supposed to be extended until June 30 also were prevented from working because they had not yet received new compliance stickers for their trucks from the California Air Resources Board.

Several stayed home. But about 25 of them marched in an orderly and mostly silent protest past the marine terminals Monday morning and said they planned to continue the practice all week.

"We are trying to bring attention to the problems with the deadlines," said Ron Dacus, spokesman for the Northern California Rail and Port Truck Association. He estimates that about 400 of the association's drivers who qualified for grants are still caught up in a backlog of filter orders and are not able to work at the port starting this week. And when they can't work, they can't pay off the debt it is costing them to buy the expensive new particulate filters required by the state.

"There are also several drivers who just gave up (on the profession)," Dacus said. "At some point it just becomes a futile effort to keep up with all the changes."

The changes have to do with tough new air-quality regulations for trucks hauling cargo into and out of California ports — 3,000 that serve the Port of Oakland.

Trucks older than 1994 are banned. Model years 1994 through 2003 are required to have new diesel filters that trap up to 85 percent of dangerous particulates that can lodge in the lungs and cause cancer and serious respiratory problems. Newer trucks have a few more years to comply.

The new rules went into effect Jan. 1. About 1,600 trucks have either been replaced or retrofitted and met the deadline. But 1,300 truckers were left hanging when \$22 million in grant funding ran out to help pay for filter retrofits and new replacement trucks.

The Air Resources Board twice extended the Jan. 1 deadline because manufacturers were taking much longer than expected to ship the filter equipment.

In addition, the deadline was extended until April 30 for about 660 drivers who applied and qualified for a new round of \$5,000 grants early this year. Of those, 254 were given an even longer deadline — until June 30 — so they could line up new financing to pay for the equipment. But without the coveted sticker, the extension means nothing.

Carlos Jordan has three trucks, three \$5,000 grants and three \$9,000 loans to repay. He hasn't received June 30 compliance stickers for any of them, so he can't work, and neither can his drivers.

"The filters are supposed to come in on the 30th of May, but I'm still waiting for my extensions to work," he said. "I'm calling San Francisco (the air district) and Sacramento (the state air board), but San Francisco says call Sacramento and Sacramento says call San Francisco."

Lisa Fasano, spokeswoman for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, said her agency has sent all the extension information to the state, and the state is responsible for sending out the stickers. Karen Caesar, spokeswoman for the Air Resources Board, said that the stickers were "sent out weeks ago" and that the truckers need to call the hot line at 1-888-247-4821 if they haven't received one.

Chris Peterson, chief wharfinger at the port, said that Monday's protest did not hamper operations at the marine terminals. He said that 346 trucks that were allowed to work at the port Friday were no longer compliant as of Monday. There are still 3,000 compliant trucks hauling at the port, which is more than enough to handle the volume at this time, he said.

"The (drop off in trucks) hasn't made an impact because of the down economy, and because a lot of the truckers stepped up and did the right thing and got retrofits or new trucks, not to belittle those who couldn't afford to do that," Peterson said.

Some of those 346 were probably among the queue of drivers at the RFID (radio frequency identification) kiosk on Maritime Street. They were rebuffed for a variety of reasons when they tried to drop off cargo at the terminals Monday morning.

Wayne Feng had a new filter installed on his 1998 model truck a month ago, but the state's Diesel Truck Registry had not yet been updated so he wasn't allowed to drop off his loaded container at the TraPac terminal Monday morning. And he has problems with his filter. The new computer's yellow light keeps coming on even though he's already wasted half a day at the service center getting it fixed.

Rajkumar Singh drives a new truck that the state's diesel truck registry shows is compliant until 2020. But he was turned away at the APL terminal because his RFID tag wasn't working.

"It's always something," Singh fumed as he waited in line. "The biggest problem in the world is this program."