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Farmers, Labor, Green Groups Unite to Fight Cuts in Conservation Programs
California Roundtable Alliance Urges Feinstein, Farr to Defend Funding

Proposed budget cuts threaten half a billion dollars in federal grants to help farmers protect the environment, but an alliance of California agriculture, labor, and conservation groups are fighting to keep the programs alive.

Twenty-four organizations – members of the California Roundtable on Agriculture and the Environment – united around the need to continue funding programs to protect soil, water and air quality, preserve wildlife habitat, and conserve energy and water.

Roundtable members are urging Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. Sam Farr of Monterey, members of the Senate and House agricultural appropriations subcommittees, to reject the Obama Administration's proposal to cut \$500 million from conservation programs approved in the 2008 Farm Bill. The cuts would mean a loss of at least \$30 million in California from what was promised in the Farm Bill.

"The proposed cutbacks will result in increased financial burdens, hitting rural communities hardest," said the Roundtable's March 12 letter to Feinstein and Farr. "Already hundreds of eligible farmers and ranchers are being turned away in California due to lack of funds. Unless we secure full funding for Farm Bill conservation programs, even fewer growers will be able to access these important program and many of California's biggest environmental challenges will not be met."

The largest and most important of the conservation programs is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP, which provides financial and technical assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to help protect soil, water, and air resources, preserve wildlife habitat and conserve energy and water. Under the Administration's proposal, EQIP would take the biggest hit of the conservation programs - \$380 million, or one-third of the funding that was promised by the 2008 Farm Bill. That level of reduction would mean about a \$25 million loss over anticipated levels in revenue for California.

Already, there is a large gap between farmers who want to participate in EQIP and the available resources. According to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, in 2009 more than 6,000 California farmers applied for EQIP, but limited funding meant that only 1,700 received grants.

CRAE is a broad coalition of agriculture, environment, labor and public agency leaders working to promote an agriculture that is economically viable, environmentally sustainable and socially responsible.

“EQIP is the single largest source of money to fund technical and financial assistance to help our farmers and ranchers protect our water, soil and air resources here in California,” said Kari Hamerschlag, senior agriculture analyst for Environmental Working Group. “This is no time to be cutting back on conservation promises made in the 2008 farm bill. This is a time to increase these programs and invest in rural America, not cut them.”

“Because EQIP requires a dollar-for-dollar match by the farmer, every dollar cut means a loss of \$2 in projects to enhance California’s natural resources,” California Farm Bureau President Paul Wenger said. “The EQIP program has been an important tool in helping farmers and ranchers enhance the stewardship work they already do.”

The Roundtable is a broad alliance of farm, labor, and environmental organizations, plus advisors from state and federal agriculture and environmental agencies, that has been working since 2004 to build consensus among agriculture and environmental interest on key issues impacting the food system.

For a complete list see <http://foodsystemalliance.org/crae/category/members/>.

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