



SB 253 – DODD Incentive Based Conservation Program

Summary

SB 253 would require the California Department of Food and Agriculture, upon appropriation by the Legislature, to establish and administer an incentive-based conservation program. The bill would require the program to optimize wildlife habitat benefits while supporting the economic viability of California agriculture by providing incentives and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers.

Background

Agriculture is a major industry for California. With 76,400 farms and ranches, California agriculture is a \$54 billion-dollar industry that generates at least \$100 billion in related economic activity. California's agricultural and rural lands are a reflection of the innovation and economic leadership of the state.

California's farmland provides many benefits to people and the environment. "In addition to valuable open space and wildlife habitat, the management decisions and conservation practices of farmers and ranchers also enhance environmental quality, provide recreational opportunities and offer social benefits" (California Department of Food and Agriculture, 2014). More resources and tools are needed for California's farmers and ranchers to address climate change and provide multiple conservation benefits through on-farm practices.

In recent years, especially during and after the drought, the delivery of on-farm conservation practices has declined. This is driven by the

rising cost of agricultural production, including water and energy costs. For example, there is approximately 75% less winter flooding of rice fields for migratory bird habitat in "high-cost" water districts, thus demonstrating the price sensitivity to growers' use of this practice based upon costs/benefits of flooding versus other practices (California Rice Commission). Thoughtful incentive programs are needed for California's farmland to continue to provide important conservation benefits.

The purpose of the program is to provide assistance to agricultural producers who want to voluntarily make wildlife-friendly improvements on their land. The program would provide financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers who create fish and wildlife habitat and provide added environmental benefits such as improved water quality, erosion control, and conserved ground water. Eligible land would include cropland, rangeland, pastureland, and other farm or ranch lands. These conservation activities, or practices, benefit fish and wildlife while also boosting the land's resiliency and production.

The health of California's agricultural lands is critical to the environment, our economy and to rural communities.

Existing Law

Existing law, the Cannella Environmental Farming Act of 1995, requires the Department of Food and Agriculture to establish and oversee an environmental farming program to



provide soil health and water efficiency incentives. The act requires the Secretary of Food and Agriculture to convene the Scientific Advisory Panel on Environmental Farming to provide advice to the Secretary on the implementation of the Healthy Soils Program and the State Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program and assistance to federal, state, and local government agencies on issues relating to the impact of agricultural practices on air, water, and wildlife habitat.

This Bill

SB 253 would require the California Department of Food and Agriculture, with advice from the Scientific Panel, to establish and administer an incentive-based conservation program. The bill would require the program to seek to optimize habitat benefits while supporting the economic viability of California agriculture by providing incentives, and outreach to farmers whose management practices contribute to wildlife habitat and result in on-farm activities that provide multiple conservation benefits.

Support

The Nature Conservancy
California Resource Conservation Districts

Opposition

None on file

Contact

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