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Protective tilling seeks to prevent soil erosion

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Farmers can protect their soil from erosion with conservation tillage -- drilling seeds through the previous crop's stubble rather than turning up the dirt.

But the practice can cause their income to erode if the yield is less than they had been getting with the old method.

A group working out of Modesto has an answer: Reimburse farmers for their losses if the conservation effort reduces their income.

The group, Sustainable Conservation, has \$1.8 million over three years to offer California farmers who take up the challenge.

"It's the one missing piece that a lot of people have been looking for in managing their risk in trying a new conservation practice," project manager Ladi Asgill said.

The project, known as the Best Management Practices Challenge, was tried with feed corn growers this year and could expand to tomatoes next year.

The project mainly promotes conservation tillage. Another part involves careful use of manure and other fertilizers, with payments to farmers if they lose money as a result of smaller crops.

Sustainable Conservation is working with the American Farmland Trust, which pioneered the idea a decade ago in the Midwest and mid-Atlantic regions. It found that in many cases, the new practices did not reduce income.

"If this works, it would be a good tool to comply (with pollution rules) and still grow a good crop," said Frank Gwerder, a Modesto area dairy farmer working to refine his use of cattle manure on feed crops.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provided \$930,000 to launch the program in California this year. An equal amount came from the University of California Cooperative Extension, the farmland trust and Sustainable Conservation, which is based in San Francisco and has a branch office on Needham Street.

Seven farmers with a total of 600 acres took part this year, Asgill said, but he has not determined whether any will be compensated for losses. He aims to enroll 20 farmers totaling 2,000 acres for 2010.

Each farmer can get compensation for two years, as well as technical help in carrying out the practices.

On each farm, a small portion is treated in the old way so the yield from the new method can be compared with it.

The production costs for each method also are calculated. In many cases, the new practice can save money, such as when conservation tillage reduces the number of tractor passes needed to prepare the ground.

The payments are made if net income from the new method falls short of net income from the old way.

"If people are going to try it, to have the risk taken away is huge," said Marsha Campbell Mathews, a farm adviser for the extension in Stanislaus County.

Some bugs still need to be worked out, she said, including the record keeping and the computer model that predicts how nutrients in manure are taken up by crops. The nutrients, mainly nitrogen, break down at different rates depending on the conditions, she said.

Gwerder said the program needs to allow flexibility to farmers to deal with these issues, but overall, he is pleased with it.

"I think all dairymen do care about the environment, even though we often don't get credit for that," he said.

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