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Use of low-dust farm practices rise

By John Holland

jholland@modbee.com

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Central Valley farmers have greatly increased their use of practices to reduce soil disturbance and dust, according to a survey released this week.

The practices grew sixfold from 2004 to 2008 in the nine survey counties, an alliance of farmers, researchers and other experts reported.

The result was cleaner air for valley residents and reduced tractor use by farmers, the alliance said.

"There is definitely a reduction across the board when it comes to fuel, labor and maintenance," said Alex Karolyi, associate director of communications for Sustainable Conservation, a San Francisco-based group that is part of the effort.

Among the practices is conservation tillage, which involves leaving much of the stubble from the previous harvest when planting corn, tomatoes, cotton or other row crops.

Farmers use various other means to lessen the amount of soil disturbed during planting and other tasks. The goal for the surveyed acreage was a cut of at least 40 percent in the number of tractor passes needed to produce a crop.

The survey found that this goal was met on 416,035 acres in 2008 compared with 64,613 acres in 2004.

The 2008 figure was 19 percent of the total row crop acreage in the nine counties -- Merced, San Joaquin, Sacramento, Yolo, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern. The survey relied on records from county agricultural commissioners.

It was done by the Conservation Tillage and Cropping Systems Workgroup, which includes representatives from farming, academia, government and nonprofit groups in California.

Helpful for dairies

The findings could be especially valuable to dairy farmers, who grow much of their own feed. They have faced low milk prices on one hand and high costs for fuel and pollution controls on the other.

"My philosophy is that good environmental stewardship must be profitable to be sustainable," Hanford-area dairy farmer Dino Giacomazzi said in a news release. "Our conservation tillage program has been helpful to our family business during these hard economic times."

Advocates say the practices can improve the fertility and water-holding capacity of the soil, resulting in larger yields.

Controlling dust could reduce asthma, heart attacks, strokes and other ailments that result from breathing the fine particles, said Janice Nolen, an assistant vice president at the American Lung Association.

The survey did not include efforts in valley orchards.

Increasingly, walnut and almond growers, for example, are using harvest machines that do not produce the big dust clouds of old.

Bee staff writer John Holland can be reached at jholland@modbee.com or 578-2385.

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.