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Project measures benefits of farms

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Group receives funds to measure positive environmental impact

By CECILIA PARSONS

For the Capital Press

Selling crops and livestock is the traditional way farmers and ranchers make a living, but another revenue stream may be flowing their way.

Determining a value for some of the things farmers and ranchers do that benefit the environment is a pilot project under the direction of Sustainable Conservation.

The organization, in partnership with other environmental nonprofits, government agencies and landowners, is using a \$372,000 conservation innovation grant from USDA to develop measurements for environmental benefits in the Mokelumne River watershed.

Project manager Kelli McCune of Sustainable Conservation said quantifying the benefits would attract funding to reward farmers and ranchers for work they do to enhance water quality and habitat along the river. The pilot program will develop uniform standards and payment procedures that would allow utility companies, government agencies, communities and foundations to reward landowners for managing their land in ways that benefit the environment.

The 800,000-acre Mokelumne watershed east of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is home to thousands of acres of winegrapes and row crops. The river also delivers water to 1.4 million people in the East Bay and provides recreational benefits.

The river also is challenged by ground-water overdraft, degradation of stream banks and impacted water quality.

It is also home to a riparian restoration project undertaken in 2007 by winegrape operation Vino Farms, a member of a stakeholder working group with Sustainable Conservation.

Vino Farms' manager Chris Storm said their 22-acre restoration project along the river involved removing invasive species of weeds and replacing them with native California species. The project was done in collaboration with U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Natural Resources Conservation Service and a group of students from Center for Land Based Learning.

Storm said the goal was to increase biodiversity on the land and reduce the potential for erosion that can impact water quality and fish -- something he hopes to work on with Sustainable Conservation under the current USDA grant.

With methods available to measure the outcomes of restoration projects and systems in place for paying landowners such as Vino Farms for their results, farmers and ranchers may be more likely to initiate them on their land, McCune believes.

"My hope is that using this project to help figure out the values, that it will spread to other growers," Storm said.

Ashley Boren, executive director of Sustainable Conservation, said landowners who manage their land responsibly provide important services that benefit nature and humans. The project will create ways to compensate them, she added.

McCune said the environmental benefits might also help growers attain certification in programs that pay premiums for crops and livestock raised where environmental concerns are addressed.

While the pilot program focuses on the Mokelumne River, it will also open possibilities elsewhere. Sierra Nevada Conservancy Executive Director Jim Branham said the issues at Mokelumne are representative of other watersheds with headwaters in the Sierra Nevada.

"We look to this pilot program as one that will provide information that can be used across the region," he said.

Nearly \$22.5 million in 52 conservation innovation grants in 40 states support conservation while enhancing agriculture productivity.

Online

www.suscon.org; watershed map: www.suscon.org/images/Mokelumne_River_Map.jpg

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