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Why farmers should apply for CDFA's 2020 Healthy Soils Program

By Kristian Salgado Special to This Newspaper
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The California Department of Food and Agriculture's 2020 Healthy Soil Program-Incentive Program offers funding, through a competitive grant process, for the adoption of conservation management practices that improve soil health, sequester carbon, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

With a maximum award of \$100,000, this grant is a great opportunity for California farming operations to pilot conservation management practices such as cover crops, nutrient management and reduced till/no till for three to 10 years (depending on the practice) with minimal financial investment on their part.

For the farmers and ranchers wondering if the cost of implementing these practices outweigh the economic and environmental benefits they provide, this is a chance to try them firsthand. The implementation of these conservation management practices are known to promote on-farm sustainability by building organic matter, encouraging nutrient cycling, increasing water holding capacity, reducing soil compaction, and the need for less synthetic fertilizers. In short, if you work for the soil, it will work for you.

However, every agricultural operation varies in their needs and could benefit from different conservation management practices depending on their location, size, crop rotation, irrigation system and soil type. For this reason, CDFA allows applicants to choose from four categories, totaling 28 eligible practices selected from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Services conservation practices standards listed below.

1. Soil management practices on annual and/or perennial croplands practices: cover crops, conservation crop rotation, mulching, nutrient management (reduce fertilizer application rate by 15 percent), residue and tillage management (reduce till/no-till) strip cropping, compost application and whole orchard recycling.
2. Herbaceous cover establishment on croplands practices: conservation cover, contour buffer strips, field borders, forage and biomass planting, grassed waterway and riparian.
3. Woody cover establishment on croplands and/or grazing lands practices: alley cropping, hedgerow planting, multi-story cropping, riparian forest buffers, tree/shrubs establishment and windbreak/shelterbelt establishment.
4. Grazing lands (Grassland, rangelands, and/or pastures) practices: compost application, prescribed grazing, range planting and silvopasture.

For example, in a low-desert farming system researchers have found that the use of cover crops, like marigolds and cowpeas over the summer that are mulched and left on the ground as a green manure is considered an effective weed management strategy, especially for organic crop production that is not allowed to use chemical weed control.

There are many variables to consider when selecting and designing conservation management practices for the Healthy Soil Program. For technical assistance, please contact or visit the Imperial County - University of California Cooperative Extension at (442) 265-7700.

To learn more, attend one of our Healthy Soils Program Workshops:

- Feb. 12, noon to 2 p.m., UC Cooperative Extension, 1050 E. Holton Road, Holtville. (This workshop will include a brief field tour of UCCE's farm that is focusing on the best fertilization/irrigation practices.)
- March 11, noon to 2 p.m., Imperial Valley Conservation Research Center, 4151 Highway 86, Brawley.
- April 22, noon to 2 p.m., Imperial County Farm Bureau, 1000 Broadway, El Centro.

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