

Water way

Tracy Press Friday, 08 June 2007

A bill that passed the Assembly will make it easier for farmers to use federal grant money to build livestock ponds, a move that could conserve water and increase wildlife habitat.

By John Upton

Farmers in San Joaquin County would be expected to dig fewer wells and build more ponds to quench the thirst of livestock and protect the environment under an Assembly bill designed to help California farm owners apply for federal conservation money.

There is a “very strong correlation” between conservation projects and the health of the 30 million acres of land owned or managed by Californian ranchers, according to Matt Byrne, vice president of the California Cattlemen’s Association.

Stock ponds raise the quality and quantity of water given to livestock, create habitat for endangered species, and leave more groundwater under the ground, according to Byrne.

Byrne said red tape and convoluted application processes cause California to miss out on some of the federal conservation funding available under Congress’s 2002 Farm Bill, which is up for revision this year.

A little more than \$110,000 in federal conservation funding went to San Joaquin County farms last year, which left more than two-thirds of the county’s allocation of the Farm Bill’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program money unspent.

The incentives program funds a variety of habitat restoration projects on agricultural land by matching money spent by farmers with federal funding.

Program funding increased nationally from \$1 billion to \$1.3 billion this year.

“We end up sending money back to the federal government,” Byrne said, “because we’re unable to implement projects quickly enough.”

Under current rules, it takes months, and sometimes years, for conservation projects to be approved by multiple state agencies, according to Byrne.

Research by the California Resources Agency found the regulatory review process is “one of the most frequently mentioned barriers to private, voluntary conservation,” according to a 2003 report.

The cattlemen’s association supports a streamlined permitting system proposed by Assemblyman Guy Houston, R-Livermore.

Houston’s proposed system would introduce a new type of permit to replace multiple permits that are currently processed by up to 12 state agencies.

A bill to introduce the new permitting system passed the Assembly unanimously Tuesday.

The bill would cost \$200,000 a year to implement, if it passes the state Senate and is signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, an Appropriations Committee researcher estimated.

Houston said his legislation met some resistance among agencies that currently issue permits. The resistance is related to jurisdictional issues, he said.

“I think we can work out some of the bugs so we’re not stepping on anyone’s toes,” said Houston, who represents Mountain House and some rural parts of Tracy. “We just want to have everybody work together to get these federal dollars. ... There is money for us to be taking, and we’re not spending it.”

David Simpson, a conservationist in Stockton’s federal Natural Resources Conservation Service office, said few, if any, farms in San Joaquin County have received federal conservation funding for stock ponds.

Simpson said farmers fear bringing attention to endangered species that live on their land, and that Houston's bill would eliminate some of that fear by reducing the number of agencies and red tape involved in the permit review process.

"Landowners say, 'I know red-legged frogs are there, and that's OK, it's not a bad thing, but the second I apply for a permit everybody in the world knows they're there,'" Simpson said. "So they'll drill a well and they'll put in some pipelines to move the water around.

"Having an endangered species is not necessarily a bad thing — it can be a positive, and we need to figure out a way to make these programs work together. ... I think he (Houston) is on the right track."

Emergency services sometimes fill helicopter tanks with stock pond water when they battle fires, according to Simpson.

Well-managed stock ponds create habitat for endangered tiger salamanders and red-legged frogs, according to Center for Biological Diversity spokesman Jeff Miller.

Central Valley stock ponds also create habitat for tricolored blackbirds, according to Miller, who has unsuccessfully lobbied the state to list the 7½-inch songbirds as endangered.