

**MEETING OF THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE-
SMALL SCALE PRODUCER ADVISORY COMMITTEE
(ALL THE MEETINGS OPEN TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC)**

Location: Virtual via Zoom

Contact: Thea Rittenhouse, Farm Equity Advisor

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MEETING MINUTES OF MAY 21ST 2025

Item
No.

(1) WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

CDFA Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse welcomed all participants to the meeting and asked CDFA staff in attendance to introduce themselves.

CDFA Staff in Attendance

Thea Rittenhouse- Farm Equity Advisor

Carmen Carrasco- Small Farm Business Liaison

Christina Harrington- Farm to Fork Grant Admin & Outreach Specialist

Nathan Johnson- Budget Officer

Raisa Rahim- CST Program Fellow

(2) ROLL CALL

Present

Justin Miller

Beverly McKinney

Lovepreet Kaur

Patrick Mitchell

Kerry McGrath

Veronica Mazariegos

Anna Nakamura Knight

Wendy Kornberg

Luis Elizondo

Absent

Josefina Lara Chavez

(3) CALL TO ORDER- Committee Chair Justin Miller called the meeting to order at 1:06 PM

(4) DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES

A) Governor's May Revise Budget Update

Nathan Johnson from CDFA's Budget Office discussed the main components of the Governor Office's May revision, including budget shortfalls and proposed solutions.

Nathan Johnson also gave an overview of the CA legislative cycle and current activities that lead up to the passage of the budget by June 30.

B) CDFA Farms to Community Food Hubs Grant Program Update

Christina Harrington of the CDFA Farm to Fork office presented on the progress of the Food Community Hubs program. There have been 165 applications submitted by non-profits, tribal entities, regional conservation districts and others. The highest number of applications came from the Greater Los Angeles region. Applicants propose to serve food producers, public schools, food banks, programs focused on food as medicine and several tribal applicants. The Office of Farm to Fork is aiming for projects to begin in early 2026.

Member Luis Elizondo asked if this might create competition with other producers who are already working with school districts. Christina reiterated that this is just a snapshot of applicants, not awarded projects, so it would not likely be competition but important to keep in mind as the review process continues.

Member Anna Nakamura-Knight voiced disappointment that grant requests for proposals like the CUSP grant have a lack of transparency in the metrics that they are looking for, given that the Request for Proposal (RFP) was amended after people submitted their applications.

Christina Harrington explained that the office was mandated to prioritize new food hubs, under direction of the legislature, which they are gathering through a survey asking growers about how many years they have been in operation.

Member Anna Nakamura-Knight highlighted that when CDFA changes its guidelines after initial publication of an RFP, it challenges the community's trust and makes it harder for applicants to score highly.

The presentation concluded without formal action by the Committee.

(5) ACTION ITEM- Approval of February 20, 2025, Meeting Minutes

Member Wendy Kornberg motioned to approve the minutes and Luis Elizondo seconded the motion. All present committee members approved the meeting minutes. Motion passed.

(6) DISCUSSION ITEMS

A) Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Advisory Committee Update

BIPOC Advisory Committee Chair Hung K. Doan highlighted that during their February meeting, the committee discussed wildfire recovery responses and resources. Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse presented about farm workers' rights and learned about the Climate Resilience Strategy for California Agriculture being compiled by the CDFA Climate and Working Lands Deputy Secretary. The BIPOC Advisory Committee formed a subcommittee to ensure accountability and equity in block-grant program administration.

The presentation concluded without formal action by the Committee.

B) Summary of the Land Equity Task Force Draft Recommendations

Camille Frazier from the Strategic Growth Council gave an overview of the background and purpose of the committee. The legislation that formed the task force builds upon the 2018 Farmer Equity Act. The Land Equity Task Force (LETf) is writing a report on recommendations to the governor and legislature on how to equitably increase access to agricultural land for food production and traditional tribal agricultural uses. Traditional tribal agricultural use has been a key part of the LETf's considerations. The report will include results from surveys, talks from guest speakers, feedback from site visits and interagency collaborations, and conversations with advisory committee members. This report is due January 2026.

High level goals of the report are to: return ancestral land to California's tribal nations and recognize and remove barriers to sovereignty of California tribal nations, to conserve and protect agricultural land through easements, to address policies' unequal impacts, to ensure equitable access to public funding for land acquisition, among others.

Beverly McKinney asked if the SGC is looking at a particular area to answer these questions.

Camille Frazier confirmed that they are looking statewide, getting variable feedback given regional diversity in priorities.

Beverly McKinney followed up by asking if the state is prioritizing finding those with historically less access.

Camille Frazier explained that the task force has been thinking beyond land access, to ensuring diversity in land stewards.

Kerry McGrath mentioned conservation easement structures worked for first generation farmers who own their land, but many new or beginning farmers do not have same opportunities to purchase farmland. Kerry asked if there will be changes to easements so that new farmers can better utilize them.

Camille Frazier said that the task force is thinking through these issues so they will follow up in the future.

Patrick Mitchell asked how the task force defines viability.

Camille Frazier explained that the agricultural and business definitions differ, so the task force is still deciding on the definition to use, but they plan to use a non-prescriptive definition that encompasses a focus on supporting diverse land stewardship.

Committee Chair Justin Miller asked if the task force is looking at innovative ways of incentivizing selling agricultural land to the next generation, as a means of creating a retirement package.

The presentation concluded without formal action by the Committee.

C) Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) Update: Options for new fee structure for probationary basins

Brianna St. Pierre introduced Natalie Stork, both representing the SGMA unit of the State Water Board.

Under SGMA, Natalie Stork explained that the Department of Water Resources reviews plans by local groundwater agencies and where plans are not inadequate or not being implemented, the Department can refer agencies to the Board for enforcement purposes. The Board can then adopt probationary designations on the basin, where they incur fees after reporting as of this year to be paid by April 1, 2026.

Currently, five basins are under consideration and two have been designated as being under probation.

Under the current fee structure, the rate is \$300 per well per year plus \$20 per acre - foot of groundwater extracted. Fee waivers are available for disadvantaged communities, public schools and those with low income.

Ali Moradi presented on two models for fee proposals (fees linearly / exponentially increase with the volume of water pumped in excess).

Anna Nakamura-Knight asked for clarification on how to interpret the graphs.

Natalie Stork underlined that the graph illustrates different models for fee issuances, where there is a baseline fee plus an additional cost based on how much extra water is pumped from a basin.

Committee Chair Justin Miller provided context that in Placer County, they draw water from the canal. He wanted to clarify how this water source will be handled and if there will be accountability to protect communities from water districts unfairly setting prices.

Natalie Stork said that SGMA was established in 2014 to ensure that everyone has access to water in the future. The agriculture industry needs a significant amount of water, so it is important that it is available going forward. She reiterated that the goal is to not under - or over-collect fees, but that they can make adjustments the following year if an over-collection is made.

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse asked about the timeline for the public comment process on this new proposed fee structure.

Natalie Stork flagged that there is an upcoming fee cycle meeting on June 11th that will be held virtually for stakeholders to provide feedback. There will additionally be a public meeting on September 16th to discuss fee adoption.

Committee Chair Justin Miller reminded the Water Board that small scale producers and Black, Indigenous, and people of color are hit the hardest by these policies.

Veronica Mazariegos asked if there is data available on the size of operations, as it relates to SGMA.

Natalie Stork said that there is some, looking at estimated groundwater pumped in relation to parcel size; 80% of operations fall in the first bracket (operations that extract the least amount of groundwater).

Veronica Mazariegos asked if they related this to number of tenants on a parcel of land.

Brianna St. Pierre clarified that they currently don't have much tenancy data and welcomed data sources or reports they committee can direct them to or consider. There are meetings June 11th, July 31st, and they are open to contact via email.

The presentation concluded without formal action by the Committee.

Public Comment: None

D) Legislative Affairs Update (from Departmental Updates)

Rachael O'Brien, Deputy Secretary of Legislative Affairs led a discussion on current activities related to legislative affairs.

The department has been tracking bills in the Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Natural Resources committees.

Rachael O'Brien is actively analyzing 16 bills that are high priority and have potentially high impact on the agricultural industry for the Governor's office.

Committee Chair Justin Miller inquired about the department's position on Senate Bill 628 that discusses agricultural overtime wages.

Rachael O'Brien highlighted that, as a rule, the department cannot discuss bill positions during the legislative session.

Justin Miller underlined the importance of talking to workers, as such a bill would have both advantages and disadvantages for the community.

Rachael O'Brien suggested reading a report by UC Berkeley on this topic.

Member Anna Nakamura-Knight asked if there were any bills specifically relevant to small scale producers.

Rachael O'Brien talked of one bill which addresses the Williamson Act and solar easements. The Department of Conservation would be the lead agency to implement this bill if passed.

Member Wendy Kornberg said that solar easements are largely for large scale producers since solar easements are not currently cost-effective for small scale producers.

There is also a bill about composting solid organic waste.

Member Veronica Mazariegos asked for clarification on what is being changed with the Williamson Act. Rachael O'Brien explained that this bill redefines and facilitates land conversion to solar easements.

Committee Chair Justin Miller suggested that revisions to the Williamson Act should not skew towards larger scale producers, as the original legislation did. Rachael asked if bringing in someone from the Department of Conservation would be useful to the committee.

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse asked Rachael to provide an update on the process to incorporate the BIPOC/SSPAC producer advisory committees into statute.

Rachael O'Brien explained that she received the recommendation the day before the proposal deadline, so CDFA was not able to propose in time, but Rachael did pursue avenues with other bills/trailer bill language. Rachael said she will continue to find other avenues to codify the committee and does not foresee any problems in going through the process in the next legislative cycle, as this is something widely supported and with no fiscal impact.

Public Comment: None

E) CUSP Program Extreme Weather Modification on Pest Quarantines (from Departmental Updates)

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse noted that the Secretary could not stay at the meeting, so she would take over this portion.

Thea explained that the Small-scale producer and Black, Indigenous, and people of color Advisory Committees have been involved in the CUSP program from the beginning when it was under the Farm Equity Office and then transferred to the Office of Grants Administration (OGA). The CUSP Program started with \$1M funding to provide grants to underserved producers as relief from COVID-19 economic impacts, then it supported drought relief, and the latest iteration includes extreme weather impacts.

Thea said that after consultation with UCANR and CDFA's Plant Health and & Pest Prevention Division Director, the OGA recently announced the removal of the pest quarantine as an eligible practice under CUSP extreme weather. The reason for this was the lack of scientific data that connects quarantines to extreme weather, thus making it difficult to justify pest quarantines as a direct result of extreme weather events. The Farm Equity Office acknowledges the guidance and input from this committee and understands this is an acute impact that producers will continue to encounter in the face of climate change. The concerns have been voiced to the Secretary; and CDFA will continue to explore scientific connections and methodologies. In the interim, there are other extreme weather practices that affected producers can and should apply for through the CUSP program.

Committee Chair Justin Miller disagrees with the OGA that quarantine is not a relevant practice against climate change and wanted to clarify what the next steps are, especially given that insurance is inadequate for diversified small-scale and medium-scale producers.

Thea Rittenhouse acknowledged that while the connection between the two factors is real for producers in the field, the connection between extreme weather was difficult to make, so next steps are to work with the Plant Division to increase outreach and engagement, and understand the gap there is in crop insurance at the federal level to be able to address it.

Anna Nakamura-Knight commented that there has not been a clear answer on why the 'other related climate impacts' in the CUSP extreme weather language that says these grants will provide relief to small farmers on extreme weather and other related climate impacts cannot be applied to pest quarantines. Anna also emphasized that there has already been reputational damage because people have already been applying and spreading the word about these resources. She asked for clarification on what OGA is doing to make sure future RFP's are honored.

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse said she will bring the question about 'other related climate impacts' back to CDFA and underlined that Anna's concerns are valid and need to be addressed at the Department level and will bring back to the Secretary. Perhaps CDFA

can mend relationships with affected farmers, talking directly with them and TA organizations in their regions.

Committee Chair Justin Miller stressed that CDFA should not overcorrect processes, given that applications are already asking for a lot of verifications.

Public Comment: Meaghan Donovan, UCANR Small Farms Network Program Manager and member of the public provided a public comment on this item. Meaghan encouraged CDFA to discuss implementation of practices before a program releases an RFP, as pulling practices back afterwards also impacts technical assistance providers and their relationships with farmers.

F) Farmworker Housing- Informational Item

Committee Chair Justin Miller advocated for the need for farmworker housing at every farm size.

Veronica Mazariegos proposed that the committee get a deeper understanding of how different counties approach this issue. Committee discussed having this item for a future meeting agenda item.

Kerry McGrath added that farmworker health and land zoning need to be part of the discussion too.

(7) SSPAC SUBCOMMITTEE UPDATES

Carmen Carrasco commented that SSPAC Subcommittee Chair Josefina Lara Chavez could not attend the meeting today but said that the Subcommittee met with Secretary Ross earlier in May and at their next meeting, the group will be discussing next steps on the definition of emergencies for small-scale producers.

(8) TOPICS FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Committee Chair Justin Miller said that the committee needs to take time to define what a small-scale producer is. This was echoed by Patrick Mitchell.

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse suggested that the committee can devote the entire next meeting to this topic, given that the USDA has also proposed making changes to their existing definition right now.

Beverly McKinney mentioned that there is a farm bill subcommittee meeting this week in Ohio and is wondering if the CDFA will attend.

Farm Equity Advisor Thea Rittenhouse said she will check with staff.

Beverly McKinney expressed the need to consider hydroponics in organic production.

(9) SCHEDULING NEXT MEETING

Carmen Carrasco will send out a poll to schedule the next two quarterly meetings.

(10) PUBLIC COMMENTS

Coco Sanabria from Roots for Change highlighted that they are working with CDFA on a Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) grant to develop a food systems infrastructure and supply chains mapping project of small scale and medium scale producers. Roots of Change will be hosting virtual and in-person regional listening sessions to gather feedback and welcome input from the committee.

(11) CLOSING COMMENTS/ADJOURNMENT

The meeting concluded at 3:54 p.m.