

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE (CDFA)
ENVIRONMENTAL FARMING ACT SCIENCE ADVISORY PANEL

February 8, 2024
9 AM to 12 PM PST

MEETING MINUTES

Panel Member in Attendance

Keali'i Bright, DOC
Dr. Michelle Buffington, PhD, CalEPA, California Air Resources Board
Don Cameron, Terranova Ranch
Scott Couch, CalEPA, State Water Resources Control Board
Vicky Dawley, Tehama RCD (Vice Chair)
Leonard Diggs, Pie Ranch
Dr. Jeff Dlott, PhD, LandScan (Chair)
Amanda Hansen, California Natural Resources Agency (joined via Zoom)
Erik Porse, PhD, California Institute for Water Resources
Judith Redmond, Full Belly Farm

Absent:

State Agency Staff and Presenters

Carolyn Cook, CDFA
Josh Eddy, Director, CDFA CA State Board of Food & Agriculture
Virginia Jameson, CDFA
Dr. Tawny Mata, PhD, CDFA
Josh Staab, CDFA

AGENDA ITEM 1 – EFA SAP Call to Order, Roll Call and Approval of the Minutes

The public meeting of the Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel was called to order at 9 a.m. by Vice Chair Vicky Dawley. Staff from CDFA and the Panel members introduced themselves.

Vice Chair Dawley led the roll call. Roll call was taken, and a quorum was present.

Vice Chair Dawley moved to pass the November 9, 2023, minutes. Moved by Member Cameron and seconded by Member Buffington. The minutes were presented and unanimously approved.

Dawley called for public comment. No public comments were provided.

AGENDA ITEM 2 – CDFA Office of Environmental Farming and Innovation Updates

Dr. Tawny Mata, Director of the Office of Environmental Farming & Innovation (OEFI), provided an overview of recent events within the office.

Mata provided the panel with an update on OEFI, following Governor Newsom's January Budget proposal. She also introduced the Dairy Plus program to the panel, asking the panel and members of the public for help doing outreach for the program so CDFA can spend down the funding.

Dr. Mata addressed the implementation of enteric methane reduction in the state.

Dr. Mata then addressed Gov's proposed budget, identifying appropriations made for OEFI programs. She recommended that producers seek funding through sister organizations.

Some programs were under-subscribed, including WETA, and as a result, some of the funding is proposed for reductions. The undersubscription of WETA does not necessarily represent a lack of demand, but a lack of capacity to absorb a sharp increase in state funding over a short period of time.

Member Bright noted a Budget letter restricting travel, contracting work. "This has been difficult for DOC to navigate for site visits, contracts with tribes. Inquiring if budget letter is impacting CDFA?"

Dr. Mata noted that COVID-19 forced much of OEFI work online, so travel issues had not been as much of an issue. "We are cutting back on meetings, technical reviewer contracts that we'd pay."

AGENDA ITEM 3 – Regenerative Agriculture Definition Update

Josh Eddy provided an update on the California State Board of Food and Agriculture's progress to define regenerative agriculture, noting its roots in the 2023 Ag Vision plan for the next decade.

Mr. Eddy's presentation highlighted the Departments' efforts to avoid greenwashing.

Mr. Eddy provided a process timeline including listening to sessions, working group meetings between December 2023 and May 2024, and finally a board recommendation to CDFA by June or July of 2024.

Mr. Eddy noted this effort is the first of its kind in the nation. Key themes from stakeholder feedback included developing a broader vs barrower definition of regenerative and defining the starting point: existing organic standards vs conventional as a baseline.

Other comments included sentiments about the human health and culture of various agricultural regions and other disadvantaged populations.

Mr. Eddy went on to recap the common comments present in each of the five public listening sessions, explaining to the panel some of the key themes and parts that would be important to incorporate into the definition as well as the thematic concerns that were discussed by the public.

Public listening sessions are scheduled, and more information about those sessions can be found on the main CDFA webpage at cdfa.ca.gov.

The listening sessions will continue to further inform the Board of Food and Ag.

Chair Dlott then opened up the discussion to panel comments and questions. He started by emphasizing the work being done by the Board, and how the engagement is reflective of that hard work.

The Panel then heard public comment.

Member Couch noted the good turnout for meetings, asking what mechanism CDFA is using to get the word out.

The answer from Mr. Eddy included: social media promotion, email lists – encourage postings for future meetings – promoted through news releases.

Member Redmond noted the transition questions, saying, “The reason for a lot of these programs is that we do want to see that transition take place in California.” She noted how to make the definition work in practices, programs also need to encourage the adoption of a definition. “A broader definition may help to bring people in, but I think greenwashing is a serious concern,” she said.

Member Redmond wondered what role the board has and what role CDFA feels like the state should take in this to understand activation of regenerative ag. Redmond asked, “Specifically, the data, seems like a lot of work to get important data? If there was a certification similar to organic? Does the state see a role for itself?”

Mr. Eddy noted the Board’s current proposal is to take the definition and recommend it to the CDFA Secretary for action. “For data points, I think it’s too early to tell,” Mr. Eddy said, noting the availability of information being requested and how it informs the secretary.

Member Cameron noted seeing pressure from both sides, some producers coming up with their own definition and labeling. Member Cameron believes the primary focus of the definition is for programs and grants and guidance for organizations. Member Cameron asked what is the difference between climate smart ag and regenerative ag? He wondered if that question had come up in working groups, and if it was something to get more input on.

Mr Eddy responded by saying, as for the last couple listening sessions, his impression was climate smart ag was being put in with regenerative ag. He sees each as separate “buckets,” but there had not been a specific discussion on what each means. He thinks it shows an indication that can support programs but defer to the process.

The discussion was then opened up to public comment.

Ramy Colfer asked “Is the discussions to have two distinct definitions: conventional regenerative agriculture and organic regenerative agriculture?”

Chair Dlott mentioned that the definition will not be a static definition but will have to be applied to each instance differently.

David Horwitz asked “To what extent is the soil health going to be founded on perennial agroecology, with its benefits to carbon sequestration in living tissue, and in constant carbohydrate pulses to the soil? And to what extent is integrated livestock management involved? And to what extent is tree planting being emphasized, such as leguminous trees, to capture carbon and accumulate excess nutrient leaching in the soil in the case of imbalances in the learning curve being applied?”

Chair Dlott advised Mr. Horwitz to access the board forums to pose these kinds of questions to improve the discussion and the public process.

AGENDA 4 – CLIMATE SMART AGRICULTURE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM UPDATE

CDFA Environmental Scientist Carolyn Cook provided the panel with an update on the OEFI TA program along with its memorandum of agreement.

Ms. Cook provided background on the TA Program to the panel, including how it was formed through Assembly Bill 2377 (2018). The program took shape in 2020, and from 2020-2022 75 projects were awarded, \$5.2 mill to support the three programs.

The objectives of the program were then discussed, including pre-award assistance as well as post-award implementation assistance.

Ms. Cook went on to discuss the 2022 MOA between CDFA USDA NRCS and UC ANR and CA RCD Association. Working together the partners will utilize their strengths to address challenges. The key messages included four primary partners collaborating to increase the effectiveness of their individual, yet complimentary services; aligning efforts will result in better utilization of services.

Areas emphasized in the MOA included equity in the delivery of TA; conservation innovation and practices; coordination; technical capacity (through training); consistent locally led TA; collective impact and communication; and support verification of HSP and SWEEP projects; and providing additional activities (up to 20%). Activities could include providing training to producers; preparing case studies; consulting with unawarded applicants; and obtaining training.

Ms. Cook highlighted the areas of focus as well as the increased CSA program funding cap from 60K per year to 90K per year. Increased funding cap to &150K per year for orgs that will provide TA in languages other than English – at least 25% of direct costs must be dedicated to non-English speakers.

Ms. Cook believes the verification can support the MOA as an opportunity to get a last chance introduction to create a relationship with a TAP who can help them again in the future.

Ms. Cook explained support verifications are needed, and TAPs are an integral part of provided those verifications.

Challenges exist. Demand exceeds supply and geographically all parts of the state are covered. For example, only a handful of orgs apply for funding to support AMMP. CDFA will encourage TA-awarded orgs to use funding for training staff, continuing ed, etc., Cook said.

Ms. Cook then provided an overview of topic areas for capacity building/training, all with the outcome of supporting assistance to orgs in maintaining or developing TA, just to name one.

Ms. Cook finally provided an update, noting the recent execution of 20 new projects totaling 2.7 M to support AMM, HSP, and SWEEP.

Moving forward Ms. Cook will continue to look for ways to offer flexibility in awards to CSA TA awardees. It is difficult for CSA TA applicants to estimate the demand for their application and project implementation assistance. Funding available for CSA TA will continue to depend on appropriations to the Climate Smart programs. CDFA will lead C2P2 workgroup focused on equity in delivery of technical assistance.

The presentation was then opened up to panel members and the general public.

Ian Vietti asked “Could you explain the rationale behind the prohibition of for-profit individuals giving technical assistance, even under the hire of a non-profit? There is additional capacity out there as seen by the success of the CAPGP program.”

Ms. Cook explained what defines a TAP, according to AB 2377. The definition has been amended to include other agencies. Operating as a contractor a non-profit probably isn’t restricted, Ms. Cook pondered.

AGENDA ITEM 5 – Climate Resilience Strategy for CA Agriculture

CDFA Deputy Secretary for Natural and Working Lands, Virginia Jameson provided an update on CDFA's work to establish new climate strategy for agriculture. The presentation included a decision-level discussion from the panel.

Ms. Jameson began by addressing the need to create a climate strategy for CA ag. Ag is facing enormous challenges vis a vis climate change, Jameson said. Ag is responsible for significant emissions globally – and about 9% of which in California. CA ag is leading with solutions. However, there is no single place for agency partners, the public, leg, or stakeholders to refer to for overview of climate ag work. The strategy is meant to identify climate related objectives and commitments. In 2023, Ag Vision's highest priority for the next decade is to "foster climate smart resilient and regenerative food systems," and to communicate with the public about climate risks, mitigation strategies and CDFA activities.

A proposed structure was presented to include an overview of overall climate ag issues – changing conditions, rarity of Mediterranean climates and soils for farming. Topics identified were then shared, and there were many, including soil carbon sequestration, on farm biodiversity, dairy and livestock methane, etc.

Within each section Ms. Jameson noted there were to be many objectives met, including the description of the challenges, the climate connection, the current challenges, equity components, as well as the efforts already underway, and finally any areas for additional research.

EFA SAP participation would require guidance on identifying research gaps; reviewing of the draft document; discussion of relevant topics at meetings to inform the document; and any other suggestions that haven't been discussed or warrant further discussion.

Ms. Jameson then provided an update, including working on a request for proposals for facilitation assistance and the hiring of a AB32 Climate Scientist Nina Bingham and Executive Fellow Margaret Phipps.

Ms. Jameson wanted to know what conversations would be most useful for the panel to convene related to the strategy; what aspects of climate/ag have not had a robust public discussion and what areas of science are rapidly advancing and warrant an overview.

Member Diggs asked that the location where the information will live needs to be easy to find and intuitive to navigate to understand the issue and how it can potentially impact the future. Diggs believes there needs to be a place where future gens can be heard and what they find concerning, empowering the public so they can see what their part to play both in what they consume and what they can do at home, showing them there is a part to play in this ongoing effort. He believes in this way the public would become more supportive of the issue.

Member Diggs also noted that CA ag needs protection also in the way practices are integrated, but certain practices need further explanation and understanding.

Member Dawley noted it's taken time for RCDs to address how measuring soil health could be improved to mitigate climate change, because the methodologies continue to change.

Member Buffington agreed the need for multiple types of discussions based on the multiple types of stakeholders and audiences. She wanted to know if there are other agencies modeling their planning documents in order to find guidance or inspiration for additional topics that might need to be considered that currently are not. Buffington believes the document will be a valuable tool to discuss issues with farmers while out in the field. Having documentation of the varied success stories will be helpful in spreading the word of the effectiveness of these strategies.

Member Buffinton believes a key message that needs to be reinforced is the value of CA ag from an economic standpoint, which would also improve under these new strategies.

The document could also be used as supplement for the California Scoping Plan, Buffington said.

She offered any assistance she could provide from the CARB side of the strategy and how so many agencies impact ag in the state.

Member Bright provided his thoughts on groundwater sustainability and the increasing value of fallowing lands and cover crops. He noted there is a lot of conjecture out there how water is collected and used in covered crop lands. Ag lands provide a benefit to reducing regional heat, Bright noted.

Member Couch wanted to make sure it was known bodies are currently in the process of being formed at the Water Board which would potentially positively affect the improvement of this ag strategy, and he looks forward to working with CDFA on all levels.

Member Porse mentioned the list of topics was good, and there was an important point made in the labor portions of the strategy, with climate change adaptation strategies that connect with rural communities. How do urban, suburban and rural areas mesh when there are system boundaries? He believes it would be important to the strategy to have a framework for how these disparate regions can connect or work together. It could potentially be an opportunity to address how committees can take on implementing this kind of strategy. If all components can be identified, then the policy makers have better ability to connect with the communities to identify systemic boundaries.

Member Porse asked if there were efforts to form a fifth assessment, to which Ms. Jameson acknowledged the search is on to inform the strategy with the help of the team she is working with.

Member Diggs mentioned he has talked to farmers, and there is a belief that climate resilience strategy can be difficult to maintain in practice based on the resources most have available to them. Without long-term financial investments, it becomes more difficult for those farmers. Intermediary areas will need to be created to make a “circular economy,” and something like that doesn’t exist yet. The means by which to create that economy needs to be formalized. He believes there has to be a consideration for climate smart tools to be leased. If critical tools could then be leased out and later sold and/or repaired for resale, it’s critical, because a more robust resale market is needed. Innovation hubs could also help stakeholders, hubs that don’t just exist at the university level.

Dr. Mata asked for further elaboration on the innovation hubs from Member Diggs. Specifically, climate-smart tools, like electric tractors and autonomous vehicles, but the integration of those tools into CSA programs have not been developed. Hubs for learning how to integrate these tools could be beneficial, Member Diggs offered as an example.

Chair Dlott reiterated the points made during the presentation to list a number of the critical issues that need to be considered for the strategy moving forward. Due to the urgency of the issue, Chair Dlott agreed with Member Diggs that getting the strategy correct, and if it is – all of these issues that were raised – agency success, the CA economy, and agriculture, all stand to thrive. Chair Dlott underscored how so many of these disparate issues are all connected, citing studies from organizations like the National Academy of Science and the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Member Redmond believes a strong element of the strategy will come from the policy making standpoint. She wonders how the strategy articulates areas for additional research, and if each topic will be written about how the vision wants to see stakeholders take action based on the document presented.

Ms. Jameson acknowledged not every scenario was documented in the strategy plan, but the finished document would be reflective of the varied conversations being had in the panel as well as from individuals who would also like to present on the topic over the course of 2024. Ms. Jameson asked the panel what they would like to talk about to be reflected in the strategy.

Member Redmond wondered if there are specific groups and organizations that spend time discussing these topics that could also be helpful in developing this strategy and ultimately any policy.

Member Cameron wondered who the final audience was and who would benefit from the formation of this strategy. Will it be solution-driven? Will it be a living document?

Ms. Jameson believes the audience is everyone, public and private stakeholders. She will be looking for expertise from other colleagues. She also believes the document will be regularly updated.

Dr. Mata added that OEFI does not take a proactive approach to identifying new climate smart agricultural programs that would be valuable to house within the Department. She believes the plan is an opportunity to develop a vision together where state funds would be most impactful. Thinking about the near-term priorities versus the long-term vision, she hopes the plan will incorporate a near-term focus and how those will connect with those long-term priorities.

Member Porse addressed the connective tissues between the separate agencies, listing obvious connections and impediments, and how those agencies can logistically go about tackling specific interconnected issues, which result in goals irrespective of the agency.

Member Dawley asked how the document would be used practically. Ms. Jameson speculated that there would be many ways specific agencies could use the document, and any ideas related to that would be welcomed. Member Dawley speculated that in order for it to be valuable it needs to be used regularly, and she worries it shouldn't just be "put on a shelf."

Member Diggs added that it may be beneficial to come up with a particular word or phrase – something that allows the Panel to clarify what their role or target effort is going to be.

Member Buffington believes the real value of the document is going to be how it is implemented by the varying agencies and groups, including policy making. If there was a document to reference, it may make specific decision-making items and action item decisions more consistent. Having documents tailored more specifically by agency could make decision-making easier.

Member Hansen provided perspective and her experience working on these strategies. What she sees as a result, that these strategies guide policy and investment to help better deliver what is needed on the ground. She added there are two climate strategies in CA: the scoping plan and the adaptation plan. For ag, she said, it can be frustrating, because without their own strategy, there are many pieces within that sector, the intent of the overarching vision isn't reflected to their full potential. The strategy can reflect an understanding of the responsibility we have as policymakers to the issues that are facing the state.

Chair Dlott then opened up the discussion to public comment.

Kimber Moreland asked, "There are many strategies for soil carbon sequestration, in this report will the nuances and potential drawbacks/ harm be included in the document?"

An anonymous viewer also asked, "I agree with the point about how to measure C sequestration. How is the group approaching this to ensure rigor?"

Tanya Gemperle-Gonclaves asked her question online, "A few thoughts on the proposed topics:

- Soil carbon sequestration- suggest looking at all soil GHG exchanges including nitrous oxide...
- Extreme Heat- Again I think this is too narrow as there are many weather-related risks- extreme weather, chill hours, frost, fog pattern changes, pollination weather, etc. ...
- Labor- broader effects on the people and communities involved
- Economic, market- how will we ensure ag will survive these risks economically, insurance, ag-based communities
- Policy consequences- as policies come into effect what are the burdens faced by farmers and how can we address these?"

Claire Broome addressed the climate crisis, by commenting that carbon removal needs to be drawn down. Ms. Broome believes the critical component of the strategy is central, and not all the answers are needed. Ms. Broome believes there is an opportunity to explore and document what can be done in croplands, range lands, forestry, etc. to sequester very substantial amounts of carbon. Being sure that we're investing in standardized funding is important. Models are not reality, Broome said. She believes the models need to be viewed iteratively.

Member Cameron believes there is a gap between biodiversity and soil health, and how more can be done to create the delineation between those things. Member Couch seconded that.

Member Redmond would like to hear more about the expenses and effectiveness of what kind of strategies partner agencies will want to use, based on the strategies proposed in the document.

Member Porse is interested in the projected impacts of the strategies proposed in correlation with current funding.

Member Dawley noted the discussion had presented a number of sub-topics, and finding a way to organize and simplify all of issues would be important. Ms. Jameson is confident in her team's ability to organize all of these issues.

Member Buffington was curious if Ms. Jameson had identified a deadline to publish the document. Ms. Jameson believes the document could be completed by 2025, but depending on the need, it could be finished by 2024.

Ms. Jameson is prioritizing soil health and nitrous oxide as she works to address some of the topics noted.

AGENDA ITEM 6 – Public Comment

No public comment was provided.

AGENDA ITEM 7 – ADJOURN

Chair Dlott motioned to adjourn the meeting at 12:05 p.m. PT, which was moved by Member Cameron and seconded by Member Buffington and Vice Chair Dawley. The motion was then approved unanimously.

Respectfully submitted by:

Josh Staab, Public Information Officer, California Department of Food and Agriculture