



July 10, 2024

Subject: Climate Smart Agriculture Program Assessment Final Report

Dear Partners and Stakeholders,

We are pleased to share the final report from a two-year grant project led by Dr. Nicholas Babin of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. In 2022, the Office of Environmental Farming and Innovation (OEFI) asked Dr. Babin to perform an assessment of our core Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) programs: the Alternative Manure Management Program (AMMP), the Dairy Digester and Development Program (DDRDP), the Healthy Soils Program (HSP), the State Water Efficiency and Enhancement Program (SWEEP) and the Climate Smart Agriculture Technical Assistance Program. Our objectives were to gain insights into the experiences and results of grant recipients, document the obstacles they faced in participating in the programs, and pinpoint areas where we can enhance or optimize the programs.

To perform the assessment, the project team interviewed staff, technical assistance providers (TAPs) and stakeholders and surveyed past program recipients. The survey responses reveal positive news about the experiences of CSA program participants. Seventy-five percent would recommend the practices for which they received funding, and seventy-one percent feel that their operations are more resilient because of their projects. More highlights include:

- 75% of recipient respondents maintained their funded project and intend to continue with the practices beyond the grant term.
- 86% of recipient respondents gained new knowledge and experience managing for multiple benefits.
- 87% of recipient respondents would apply for the funding again.
- 79% of recipient respondents thought the program staff were professional and knowledgeable.

This encouraging feedback demonstrates that the CSA programs are meeting their principal objectives and that participants are generally satisfied with their experience.

Over the years, OEFI has welcomed stakeholder input and feedback on the programs through listening sessions, public comment periods, advisory groups and project close-out surveys. Due to this ongoing dialogue, we are unsurprised by some of the barriers and challenges shared by survey respondents, especially those reported from early funding cycles. Approximately 30% of recipients across the programs indicated that the application windows are too short and that the application procedures were not easy to understand. OEFI has endeavored for continuous improvement in the application



process over funding cycles. We must work around administrative restraints, including fluctuating one-time funding that creates staffing challenges, funding authority requirements that constrain flexibility, and tight timelines for getting dollars out the door. We recognize the need to facilitate an application process that is not burdensome and accommodates all types of California farmers and ranchers. We've made progress on this and will continue to keep it a top priority using these study results as guidance.

In the most recent funding cycles, we have been able to address several of the findings in the report. For example:

- To streamline the application process, HSP and AMMP have introduced the "RePlan" tool. HSP applicants can now generate all the background documents and plans for their project through the stand-alone tool, and easily attach the resulting document to a simple online application. Similarly, the tool allows AMMP applicants to map their projects and provide comprehensive information about their proposals, making the resulting applications more detailed and easier to score.
- HSP addressed concerns over the growth of large compost applications and the decline of proposals for planting practices by giving priority to multi-practice projects in the most recent funding cycle. This approach is likely to evolve further over time.
- The report calls for OEFI to increase the flexibility of the technical assistance program and to target additional technical assistance to socially disadvantaged growers. In the most recent funding cycle of the technical assistance grant program, OEFI offered TAPs an increased number of reimbursable activities. Technical assistance providers may now support general training of producers, support project verifications, develop case studies documenting the benefits of climate smart agriculture practices and pursue professional development and capacity building training opportunities. OEFI also provided larger grant awards to providers that commit to providing translation and interpretation to non-English speaking farmers and ranchers.

The report includes several compelling findings that we want to understand better. For example:

- The report indicates that variable frequency drives (VFDs) and solar arrays funded through SWEEP have a persistence rate of 79% and 81% respectively. Considering that those components are significant infrastructure investments, we want to understand why a significant proportion of producers discontinue use or if there is a possibility that the survey instrument did not capture valid reasons for temporary disuse of equipment, such as availability of surface water or short-term following.

- Similarly, the report finds low post-project compost adoption by first-time users, at 51%. In the survey results, many farmers indicated that they saw it as a short-term substitute for fertilizers. The survey instrument, however, does not reveal enough reasoning behind this statement to help us understand how we can make changes to the program itself or technical assistance supporting the program improve adoption rates. Continuous compost application has benefits beyond soil fertility, and its benefits to soil fertility may not be strongly apparent within the three years.
- Another interesting finding was that only 43% of compost-bedded pack barn recipients (funded through AMMP) state that they are unlikely to convert their compost-bedded pack barns into a more traditional freestall barn. However, the data also shows an 86% persistence rate for the compost-bedded pack barn practice among survey respondents. AMMP conducts monitoring of each funded project for a minimum of five years after completion. As of now, the program is not aware of any instances where the funded compost-bedded pack barns were abandoned or converted into freestall barns, and thus we want to understand better why producers feel uncertainty about this practice but seem to rarely act on that uncertainty.

We appreciate the partnership with Cal Poly on this important look back at the programs. We thank the interviewees and survey respondents who provided their thoughts on the Climate Smart Agriculture programs, contributing to the findings and recommendations. It's been ten years since California established these programs. In the intervening years, OEFI has held 29 solicitations for AMMP, DDRDP, HSP and SWEEP, resulting in approximately 3,000 projects, totaling over \$600 million. Our team finds every opportunity to assist producers in building resilience in their agricultural operations to be rewarding. We look forward to continuous improvement and to supporting producers in their sustainability goals.

Sincerely,



Tawny Mata
Director
OEFI



Carolyn Cook
Manager of Incentive and TA Programs
OEFI