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

**October 20, 2022**

**9 AM to 12 PM**

**MEETING MINUTES**

**Panel Member in Attendance**

Jeff Dlott, LandScan (Member and Chairperson, In Attendance)

Vicky Dawley, Tehama RCD (Member and Vice Chairperson, In Attendance)

Michelle Buffington, Ph.D., CalEPA, California Air Resources Board (Member, In Attendance)

Scott Couch, CalEPA, State Water Resources Control Board, (Member, In Attendance)

Don Cameron, Terranova Ranch (Member, In Attendance)

Leonard Diggs, Pie Ranch (Member, In Attendance)

Amanda Hansen, California Natural Resources Agency (Member, In Attendance)

Judith Redmond, Full Belly Farm (Member, In Attendance)

Greg Norris, USDA NRCS (Subject Matter Expert, In Attendance)

# State Agency Staff and Presenters

Virginia Jameson, CDFA

Carolyn Cook, CDFA

Ravneet Behla, CDFA

Stephen Tachiera, CDFA

Sam Blacklock, CDFA

**AGENDA ITEM 1 – EFA SAP and CDFA Introductions**

The public meeting of the Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel was called to order at 9:08 am by Vice Chairperson Dawley. Staff from CDFA and the Panel members introduced themselves. Member Bright was not in attendance today. Chair Dlott joined later in the meeting.

**AGENDA ITEM 2 – Minutes from Previous Meeting**

Vice Chairperson Dawley proposed postponing the approval of the previous meeting minutes to the next EFA-SAP meeting so the Panel would have a chance to review the minutes. There were no dissenting opinions on this so the approval will be moved to the next EFA-SAP meeting.

**AGENDA ITEM 3 – Definition of Regenerative Agriculture**

A letter was introduced by Member Cameron from the State Food and Agricultural Board that discussed the definition of regenerative agriculture. Member Cameron emphasized that given the Board’s recommendations for the letter to be science-based, the EFA-SAP would be best suited for assisting with this task and to give recommendations for a definition. Deputy Secretary Jameson explained the letter content. Member Cameron explained that the Board is looking for a comprehensive definition and reemphasized the suitability of the EFA-SAP for working on the definition and thanked the rest of the panel for their assistance with this task.

Member Diggs requested for time to be set aside for the Panel to meet and discuss the definition. Member Diggs reminded the panel that they were tasked with determining the ecosystem services definition and requested that both definitions be workshopped together. Member Hansen clarified the duty of the Panel to provide suggestions and a draft definition to the Board, then the Board will do a final review and edit before submitting to CDFA. Member Buffington inquired about the California Energy Commission (CEC) climate innovation program and if this program was related. Member Buffington offered her support for this task and requested the Panel consider avoiding making the definition a limiting factor in future agricultural programs. Member Buffington also clarified the role of CDFA staff in this task. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that CDFA staff would be happy to support the Panel in their tasks. Member Couch suggested CDFA legal look at the statues in the public resources code to make sure the CDFA proposed definition does not conflict with the CEC definition. Member Buffington inquired about sharing definitions and guidelines between state agencies, specifically what the definition of regenerative agriculture will do and how it will be used. Member Cameron answered that producing a definition is motivated by CDFA programs but did not want to comment on the use of it by other state departments. Member Diggs indicated that there is a date on the Board letter and requested the Panel to consider a timeline for working on this definition. Member Dawley asked if the December EFA-SAP meeting would be appropriate for working on this project and Deputy Secretary Jameson responded positively and indicated that CDFA staff would work on this in the interim. Member Cameron reemphasized the role of CDFA staff in reviewing existing definitions for presentation to the EFA SAP Panel, and Member Couch requested that CDFA staff provide a draft of the definition to be discussed at the December EFA-SAP meeting. Member Dawley agreed on the role of CDFA staff and indicated the topic discussion was concluded.

Member Dawley requested any public comment for this agenda item.

Public Member Christina Beckstead, executive director of the Madera County Farm Bureau, requested that other words and synonyms for regenerative agriculture are incorporated into this definition. Additionally, she requested that the definition align with programs related to regenerative agriculture so that existing programs do not need to be revised.

Public Member Thomas Stratton, an organic dairy farmer in Humboldt County, was concerned with the greenwashing of regenerative agriculture and requested that farmers and ranchers are recognized for their efforts but also to be specific about what actions are considered regenerative to avoid lumping all ideas around the topic together. He suggested that the definition include language about ecological outcome certification and required data to be submitted to make the regenerative label something that is achieved over time.

Chair Dlott closed the public comment for this agenda item.

**AGENDA ITEM 4 – Whole Orchard Recycling Practice**

Ravneet Behla from CDFA presented a review on the Whole Orchard Recycling practice for the Healthy Soils Program. This topic was a follow-up from the September EFA-SAP meeting which introduced how this practice was proposed to change to allow more flexibility for implementation. Ravneet Behla presented the review of practice and modeling analysis results. It was explained how modeling scenarios were run for grain corn as model crop for annual crop. The analysis results showed that there is still net GHG benefit for the state therefore the program recommends removing the practice requirement which requires WOR implementation must be followed by fallowing or orchard plantation.

Member Cameron agreed with changing the Whole Orchard Recycling requirements and wondered if the program doesn't need to specify the type of crops to allow for more flexibility. Ravneet Behla clarified that if approved, there will be no post-implementation requirements. Member Cameron fully supported this change. Member Hansen wanted to express appreciation in the analysis completed by the CDFA staff to look at this to allow for program flexibility. Member Buffington expressed appreciation as well, and wondered if there are restrictions on land selling, for example the land being sold for development after the orchard is pulled. Ravneet Behla indicated that such hypothetical change is to applicable to nearly every project OEFI funds, and current agreement language does not prohibit it beyond agreement term. He also noted that program will consult Department’s Grant Administration Branch to evaluate if certain language can be added to the agreement.

Vice Chairperson Dawley opened the floor for public comment on this agenda item.

Public Member Arshdeep Singh expressed support for changing the implementation requirements for the Whole Orchard Recycling practice.

Vice Chairperson Dawley proposed a motion to approve changing the implementation requirements for the Whole Orchard Recycling practice. Member Cameron and Couch seconded the approval of the motion. The Panel unanimously approved passing the motion.

**AGENDA ITEM 5 – Block Grant Pilot Projects for HSP and SWEEP**

Deputy Secretary Jameson reintroduced the Block Grant Pilot Program to the EFA-SAP and provided justification for the concept regarding historic levels of funding and streamlining programs and timelines for the development of the concept so far. Deputy Secretary Jameson provided an overview of the input received so far. Supporting comments included block grants strengthening regional relationships and increasing flexibility and efficiencies. Opposing comments included geographic coverage challenges, added levels of administration using funds previously allocated for farmers/ranchers, farmers/ranchers not being able to directly apply, conflicts of interest, resistance to change away from an already working program, and comments that the minimum award of $2 million is too high. Deputy Secretary Jameson emphasized common themes that public feedback addressed including requests for a standard application and in-place review process to ensure fair assessment/awarding, standardized contracting processes, clarity on the administrative cap, better definition between administrative and TA costs, and a need for flexibility in funding flow. Additional recommendations provided by the public included allowing for regional flexibility in payments, a request that block grants and existing CDFA programs are run concurrently, inclusion of a third-party review for funding decisions, and suggestions that CDFA hire out administration of funds to a third-party. Deputy Secretary Jameson offered other considerations for the panel to consider which were not part of the public and stakeholder feedback, which included details on current technical assistance (TA) as specified by AB 2377: a $5 million cap on TA for appropriation to each program, 5% of each appropriation be available for TA, 3-year limit on TA agreement, up to $100,000 per year TA. Deputy Secretary Jameson noted that appropriations are yearly, so the current CDFA program holds a stand-alone TA solicitation for each year’s appropriation. Deputy Secretary Jameson noted additional considerations which included resource limitation on staffing, increased time to execute and invoice on projects, upcoming transition to new grant management software that will change the application process and grant management. Deputy Secretary Jameson summarized the presentation by making three recommendations to the Panel: 1) Release draft RGA for the Block Grant Pilot and TA grant program for Public Comment, 2) Run the Block Grant and TA Solicitations, and 3) Run Traditional Programs. Deputy Secretary Jameson requested questions from the Panel regarding the proposal.

Member Couch expressed appreciation for the hybrid approach regarding both types of solicitation and emphasized the hybrid approach will address the comments regarding the system change as an issue. Member Couch also expressed concern that the hybrid approach may result in more work for CDFA staff. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that offsetting the timeline for these solicitations may help reduce workload for CDFA staff.

Member Diggs inquired about limits on the number of TA providers involved in the pilot and how regional dispersal of TA may work. Deputy Secretary Jameson responded that TA could be directly involved in block grants or be contracted through a third party by a block grant. Member Diggs also inquired about direct stakeholder feedback and how the program may address and monitor other benefits that the block grant program may provide to assess program success. Deputy Secretary Jameson agreed that a system of monitoring program success is worthwhile and could be created. Member Diggs also inquired about confidentiality in the process and how it may be maintained or not. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that training on project monitoring and confidentiality would be necessary for the program.

Member Dawley clarified who could be TA providers versus block grant recipients. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that CDFA is still open to suggestion on the separation of these two groups or not, and that this topic could be addressed during public comment on the solicitation documents. Member Dawley indicated that the role of block grant recipients needs to be clarified so there is not confusion on where TA will come from. Additionally, Member Dawley inquired about who will use CDFA’s new application portals. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that certainly block grant applicants will use the CDFA application portal, but CDFA IT needs to determine whether expansion to other applicants could be possible. Member Dawley expressed a concern for geographic-driven shortages of funding and indicated that CDFA should consider how to avoid this. Member Dawley also inquired on the bottleneck for staffing at the State and asked if that bottleneck could be eliminated or addressed outside of the block grant.

Subject Matter Expert Norris indicated that Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is similar to the proposed block grant and expressed that running the block grant as a pilot is prudent because initial RCPP projects added to the workload instead of reduced workload for NRCS staff.

Member Cameron asked about the percentage of funding that will be allocated to the pilot block grant program and what block grant recipients will do for staffing if they are awarded given the inconsistency in the funding of these programs. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that the goal of the block grant program is to reduce the number of contracts the teams are processing so a significant proportion of this year's funding will be allocated to the block grant program. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that CDFA receives 5% for 1 year for administrative fees, but that block grant recipients could have a higher percentage for 3 years of the contract for administrative fees, and that this difference in time and funding amounts may help with staffing for the block grant recipients.

Member Buffington seconded the concept of a pilot program to gather lessons learned and remarked that CARB is also experiencing rapid growth. Member Buffington provided information on the three ways CARB addresses funding of programs – 1) CARB includes some direct funding to grantees (smallest allocation), 2) CARB runs block grants that have air districts as recipients, so the set of possible recipients is defined, and 3) CARB use 3rd party administrators to administer contracts but also gather data at a statewide level. Member Buffington indicated that CARB has also experienced instability in funding and that block grant funding often allows for faster hiring / flexibility in hiring at the block grant recipient level.

Deputy Secretary Jameson, Mr. Ravneet Behla, and Ms. Carolyn Cook commented on the number of contracts SWEEP and HSP teams are currently managing (~300 for SWEEP and ~1300 for HSP) and the amount of time CDFA staff spends on administration. Both Mr. Ravneet Behla and Ms. Carolyn Cook gave general estimates on time allocations staff deals with in regard to verifications and scope of work revisions. Carolyn Cook also discussed the administrative staff workload for this associated work.

Chair Dlott wanted to follow-up with Member Buffington asking who the third parties are involved. Member Buffington indicated that non-profits were the main groups that they partner with, particularly with the vehicle incentive programs and that CARB also has had a financial institution step in to assist and they are also working with a statewide equity group focused on air quality improvement. Chair Dlott also asked how CARB selected/sett parameters for groups to be qualified and avoid favoritism. Member Buffington indicated that it is something they are working to avoid. For example, the first come, first serve model might not be the most equitable, and in contrast the voucher program is not oversubscribed, so more equitable access and less pressure on applicants is possible.

Chair Dlott opened this agenda item for public comment.

Public Comment on Block Grant Pilot Program:

1. Public Member Lorraine Marsh – Grower in Colusa County that has participated in HSP and SWEEP programs, indicated not in favor of block grant proposal and indicated that not all applicants need TA. They also indicated a personal experience with the Pollinator Habitat Program - since not having the right connections, they were not able to apply despite already having a project design. She indicated that if the block grant program would move forward, the application and criteria should be the same everywhere and there should be statewide availability.
2. Public Member Arshdeep Singh – Represents a non-profit that helps small farmers in CA, indicated assisted growers and ranchers for SWEEP program, but very few of their organization's members knew about the program. Supported block grant concept because it would allow for more outreach, but does not support first-come, first-serve application process.
3. Public Member Jason Linman – Farmer of ~100 acres in Central Valley and has completed SWEEP and HSP grants and assisted other growers with their applications, indicated that he does not support the block grant. They have not had experience or contact with non-profits, and that money should directly go to farmers instead of non-profits.
4. Public Member Thomas Stratton – Humboldt County organic dairy farmer, indicated they are the recipient of block grant funding through North Coast Growers Association and speaks on behalf from those that have benefited from block grants. Requested that given the highly competitive nature of these grants they would like to still have direct access to these grants in that block grants should be run after the traditional solicitation occurs.
5. Public Member Colleen Cecil – Executive Director of Butte County Farm Bureau, indicated they are not in favor of transitioning programs to block grants and indicated that many of their members have successfully completed SWEEP grants as the program exists now. Commented that the relationships between CDFA and farmers and is strong and feels that a block grant system would hurt this relationship.
6. Public Member Ron Leimgruber – Farmer in Imperial Valley, indicated they are strongly opposed to a block grant program and believes it is another layer of possible corruption and boundary between CDFA and farmers and ranchers and taking away money from farmers and ranchers. Indicated that current TA providers work very well, and it has taken a few years to get CDFA staff and TA providers to work so well together. Requests if there are issues to improve, CDFA looks at the application process.
7. Public Member Sandra Nakagawa – From CalCAN, appreciated CDFA for their challenges with higher funding rates, and indicated support for block grant program but provided recommendations: 1) standardized application for content and timing and try to get it to mirror existing applications, 2) CDFA provides better clarity for administrative costs and scope of responsibilities, 3) CDFA designate a state-wise support entity for block grant recipients like the DOC’s land repurposing program, 4) CDFA should consider tracking and reporting on block grant recipients, and 5) CDFA build oversite to avoid conflicts of interest and make sure funding is awarded fairly – something like an independent review panel.
8. Public Member John Monroe – Almond grower in Arbuckle and has received SWEEP grants, indicates they understand the purpose of block grants but are concerned that block grant recipients' regional coverage may be limited and supports previous comments on statewide capabilities. They also supported CalCAN’s proposal of reporting and tracking to be stated clearly up front and to include an evaluation of poor performance and remediation. They also supported direct funding to farmers and ranchers from CDFA until the block grant pilot has been validated.
9. Public Member Patricia Hickey – Managing Director at Carbon Cycle Institute and previously a RCD Director, raised the issue between separating TA from administrative duties and cautioned against separating or prohibiting these roles. Provided an example that agroforestry practices require more TA to implement this properly.
10. Public Member Kendall Barton – Tule (a vendor eligible for SWEEP funding), indicated that TA support is coming from block grant recipients so separating them would be challenging. Appreciated Member Dawley’s questions around the block grant. Also indicated that there is a missing awareness of these programs from smaller growers/farmers, so other organizations could help provide outreach.
11. Public Member Amber McDowell – Sacramento County Farm Bureau, emphasized that CDFA needs to make sure they assess how much extra work might be added for the block grant program on top of existing work. They also emphasized that block grant recipients may struggle with grant execution and cash flow funding. They also indicated that we need water savings projects in the valley more, but these areas are not priority populations.
12. Public Member Claire Broome – Professor of Public Health and expert on cost effectiveness modeling. Concerned on carbon sequestration for state agencies. AB1757 natural and working lands implementation requirements. Emphasized the importance of climate targets and pesticide reform to the programs. Supported block grant concept because regional flexibility to center equity. Requested a separate funding stream for independent data collection for validation. Also asked the EFA-SAP to consider who they are not hearing public comments from.
13. Public Member Katie Little – California Farm Bureau, indicated they could see there are benefits for a third-party system, but CDFA is seeing more direct applications than in previous years. They indicated concern this proposal will not support growth in climate smart programs in the state and supports the current simplified application process. They recommended that the Pollinator Habitat Program should be assessed as a successful pilot before expanding block grant programs.

Chair Dlott requested that additional comments should be kept to less than 2 minutes and state support or opposition.

1. Public Member Adria Arko – No affiliation given, recommended moving forward with HSP program as it currently exists, and that the block grant program be developed with an ad-hoc committee of potential recipients, other stakeholders, and partner agencies to develop a strong program. Recommended a subcontract with groups to review grants.
2. Public Member Taylor Roschen – Conway (represents agricultural commodity groups), indicated opposition to the block grants and would like to know how future funding uncertainty may affect the programs. They also commented on baseline funding for OEFI and CDFA grants offices.
3. Public Member Hope Zabronsky – UCANR Climate Smart Agriculture Program, indicated that implementation or verification requirements for current program can be further streamlined as a first approach and that CES program has been very successful in providing TA support for grantees.
4. Public Member Jan Dietrick – No affiliation given, indicated support for Public Member Claire Broome’s recommendations. Indicated program importance to meet local needs.
5. Public Member Sergio Medal – CA Community Group, requested the program to be inclusive of all size farming operations that are doing carbon farming, especially small size and under representative groups, and that there should be directives for data collection and quantification. Also indicated that NGO of different types should have options for subcontracting with the program.
6. Public Member Kelli Evans – No affiliation given, indicated that TA system could improve outreach or be funded further for more outreach. They are not in favor of the block grant system because regional limits to funding could hurt areas with many SDFR applicants.
7. Public Member Eric Schmidt – A small farmer and recipient of NRCS grant in 2015, indicated does not support block grants and does not think it is necessary as the system is working well.

Public comment ended and Chair Dlott opened the floor for the Panel based on the public comments.

Member Diggs appreciated the public comments and the scope of work communicated by CDFA but indicated there was not a percentage of work provided. Member Diggs would recommend a lower amount of funds be allotted to the pilot program - not to exceed 50% of fund available.

Member Dawley agreed with Member Diggs comment and indicated support of the hybrid program as the best approach.

Member Hansen commented that the hybrid approach should be attempted and is open to reducing % amount of funds for the block grant pilot program. They indicated this is an approach that has been implemented in the state elsewhere successfully.

Member Buffington commented that this is the most public participation for an EFA-SAP meeting in a while. Member Buffington also indicated they are supportive of the pilot for the block grant program and wanted to note that oversight should be considered for the block grants.

Member Couch also agreed with having a lower percentage of funds allocated towards the pilot block grant program. Member Couch also asked for compromise and to focus on doing the Healthy Soils Program regular solicitation potentially first before the pilot block grant.

Chair Dlott questioned whether the regular program could be run first. Deputy Secretary Jameson recommended that the TA and the pilot block grant program to be run first before the traditional solicitation to have the TA agreements in place before the traditional solicitations open.

Member Cameron agreed that the pilot program should be 50% or less available funding and should mirror individual grants in all components. Also agree that traditional solicitation may make more sense to run first.

Chair Dlott provided a quick summary of the discussion of main topics that CDFA will be asking written and public comment for, including the percentage of funding to go to the pilot program, regional vs. statewide block grants, TAs and serving as grant administrators, % of admin costs, level of measurements and validations, oversight, and application process standardization.

Chair Dlott separated out motions into two parts, 1) motion to go forward with pilot block grant program, and 2) a motion to set the timing on the programs as soon as TA agreements are in place. Chair Dlott opened for motions on next steps. Member Cameron recommended moving forward with the block grant approach, and Member Redmond seconded the motion 1. Motion 1 passed unanimously.

The second proposed motion of CDFA moving forward as soon as TA agreements in place was discussed. Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated there was not a reason why individual contracts would be delayed after the TA agreements, so Chair Dlott decided to not make a second motion.

**AGENDA ITEM 6 – Visioning Session**

Chair Dlott proposed to table visioning sessions agenda item until the next EFA-SAP meeting in December. Panel members agreed to the motion.

**AGENDA ITEM 7 – Public Comment**

Public Member Lorraine Marsh appreciated that the Panel had decided to include the traditional solicitation structure for SWEEP and HSP and requested that the solicitation dates be made explicit and well publicized.

Public Member Claire Broome commented that she wanted the Panel to consider that rather than taking a percent of total funds available, CDFA considers increasing current HSP and SWEEP grant capacity, as well as having separate funding pots available for standardized measurements across programs.

**AGENDA ITEM 8 – Next Meeting**

Deputy Secretary Jameson indicated that the next meeting would be held December 13, 2022.

Chair Dlott introduced the motion to adjourn the meeting. The motion was moved by Member Cameron and seconded by Member Buffington. The Panel members unanimously voted to adjourn. The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

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Elizabeth Hessom, Senior Environmental Scientist for Healthy Soils Program

Nina Bingham, Environmental Scientist for Healthy Soils Program