

# State to hand out nearly \$7 million in grants for soil health

The California Department of Food and Agriculture is offering nearly \$7 million in competitive grants to assist farmers and ranchers with such soil health projects as composting, planting cover crops and reducing tillage.

**Tim Hearden • Capital Press**

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Chrissy Freeman of the University of California Cooperative Extension's master gardeners program discusses the benefits of composting for healthier soils during a presentation Aug. 12 at the Nevada County Fair in Grass Valley, Calif. The state is giving out money to growers for measures to maintain healthy soils, including composting.

SACRAMENTO — The state is taking applications for nearly \$7 million in grants to help farmers and ranchers adopt such soil health practices as composting, cover crops and reduced tillage.

Applicants have until Sept. 19 to seek \$3.75 million in incentives or about \$3 million for demonstration projects from the state Department of Food and Agriculture's Healthy Soils Program.

Under the program, paid for with cap-and-trade auction proceeds, projects would be for three years, with the third year of costs required as matching funds.

"We think the Healthy Soils Program is a great opportunity, and it's something that the farmers we work with have asked for," said Jeanne Merrill, policy director for the California Climate and Agriculture Network, which promotes sustainable agriculture.

"They see the value (of healthy soils), not only for reducing greenhouse gas emissions but also improving crop yield and holding more water," Merrill said. "There are economic benefits as well as climate benefits."

The state will provide competitive grants to projects that reduce greenhouse gases and sequester soil carbon. Eligible activities could include the use of compost, mulch and cover crops; reduced tillage; and planting trees and shrubs as windbreaks, according to CalCAN.

The program was proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2015 but didn't get its first funding until late in 2016, when the Legislature allocated the money from California's cap-and-trade auction revenue.

Brown's recent signing of a bill to extend the cap-and-trade program to 2030 provided some certainty about the grants program, which has captured the attention of many of the state's organic and conventional farmers, CalCAN officials said.

The grants come as the Soils Health Partnership, a farmer-led nationwide initiative, has endorsed a set of 19 soil health measurements that will help growers determine the effectiveness of their activities.

The group's "Tier 1" measurements include organic carbon, soil texture, penetration resistance, nitrogen levels, base saturation, bulk density, water-holding capacity and infiltration rate, according to the partnership's website.

"I think it's something we've known for a long time — if you increase your soil organic matter, you'll not only help the climate but you'll help soil fertility and improve crop yields," Merrill said.

Online

Visit <https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/oefi/healthysouils/> . Applications must be made through the State Water Resources Control Board's Financial Assistance Submittal Tool at <https://faast.waterboards.ca.gov/> .

California Climate and Agriculture Network: <http://calclimateag.org/>

Soil Health Partnership: <http://www.soilhealthpartnership.org/>