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Amidst Drought, Study Finds Farm Water Use Efficiency Under-Served; Legislators Weigh In

SACRAMENTO — A new study finds that efforts to address California’s chronic water scarcity and drought have neglected to support crucial steps farmers can take to optimize their water usage. With the current drought already devastating agriculture across the state, California must do a better job of supporting on-farm water use efficiency practices, the authors say.

The new study, entitled *Beyond the Irrigation District: Investing in On-Farm Water Stewardship for California’s Future*, was conducted by Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), a non-profit organization that advocates for California’s family farmers, and jointly released with the California Climate and Agriculture Network. The authors examined past state water bonds – Propositions 50 and 84 – and found that few dollars went toward supporting farmers in improving water use efficiency on their land.

For example, of the \$37 million from Proposition 50 that funded agricultural water use efficiency since 2005, nearly three-quarters of the funding has gone to infrastructure and engineering projects such as pipelines, canals and pumps. Only 8% of those funds have helped farmers implement proven, inexpensive on-farm water conservation practices such as irrigation scheduling, soil moisture management, and keyline design.

“Large farms with the means and money to become more efficient have done so, but most others lack those resources and incentives,” said David Runsten, CAFF Policy Director and an author of the report, “The point here is that everyone can benefit from better investments in on-farm water efficiency.”

The state legislature is currently debating a water bond that may go before the voters on the fall ballot. Several legislative leaders have called for better addressing water use efficiency needs in the state.

“Advancements in technology like remote timers, drip irrigation, and recycled water now allow farmers to partner with the state in water efficiency, as well as land conservation,” said Assemblymember Mike Gatto (D – Los Angeles), “If we can help farmers to continue to save water, we should do that, especially in this time of drought. My bill AB 2636 would provide low-cost loans to farmers, as well as homeowners and businesses, for precisely this purpose.”

Assemblymember Das Williams (D – Santa Barbara) added: “Our investments must incentivize the leading edge of water conservation, for both urban and agricultural water users, large and small. Improved water conservation is key to a sustainable water future for California.”

The CAFF report also finds that regional water management planning efforts, even in heavily-irrigated areas, include little to no focus on farm water use efficiency projects. Urban projects have received more funding than agriculture projects, even though the agriculture industry consumes close to 80 percent of the state’s developed water supply. The California Department of Water Resources conservatively estimates that improved farm water use efficiency practices could save one million acre-feet of water every year, water that could be used elsewhere in agriculture.

“Climate change scenarios for the state suggest that we must do everything we can now to invest in water use efficiency,” said Jeanne Merrill, Policy Director with the California Climate and Agriculture Network. “We cannot afford to repeat past water bonds by ignoring on-farm water stewardship investments.”

A summary and full report can be found at: www.caff.org/programs/policy/water