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NEW LAWS

Environmental bills carve out space for ag

BIOMASS BILL CLEARS STATE ASSEMBLY; CLIMATE-CHANGE BILL PASSES SENATE

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June 06, 2015 6:00 am • [Seth Nidever Staff Reporter](#)

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As California ratchets up its fight against air pollution and global warming, how does the state's \$45 billion agriculture industry fit into the mix?

Lawmakers partly answered that question by pushing a couple of bills with important agricultural components closer to Governor Jerry Brown's desk for signing.

AB 590, championed by Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield, cleared the Assembly this week. It now moves to the Senate.

The bill would funnel cap-and-trade revenue into subsidies for biomass power-generating plants that burn agricultural waste.

The plants have been crucial in providing farmers an air-friendly way to get rid of orchard waste and other green material rather than burn it in the open. However, the biomass industry has been dying out as cheaper natural gas power plants become more prevalent.

The number of biomass plants in the state once numbered around 50, but has dwindled to about 20 in recent years. A Delano facility that takes Kings County waste is still open but has been threatened with closure. Another key plant in Mendota closed last year.

Salas' bill could bring some of these plants back on line.

"That's good news," said Dino Giacomazzi, Kings County Farm Bureau president.

"The Delano biomass facility has helped reduce 96 percent of the pollutants released from open-field burning," Salas said in a written statement. "This facility alone converts 300,000 tons of agricultural waste per year into clean, renewable energy."

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District has cracked down on open-field burning since the early 2000s.



AB 590, co-authored by Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield, would subsidize this Delano biomass facility that receives agricultural waste from Kings, Tulare and Kern counties.

[\(1\) More Photos](#)

The statement from Salas' office went on to claim that air quality officials referred to the Delano biomass facility "a stationary air pollution control device."

The biomass bill wasn't the only legislation to clear one of the two houses this week to address environmental concerns while easing the path for agriculture.

SB 367, authored by Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, would incentivize farmers to adopt practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance long-term sustainability.

The bill cleared the Senate this week. It next goes to the Assembly.

There has long been talk of ways to give farmers credit for growing plants that scrub carbon dioxide — the most common global warming gas — out of the air.

Practices such as conservation tillage allows farmers to sequester than carbon in the soil and essentially keep it from being re-released into the atmosphere after harvest.

"I've been practicing conservation tillage on my dairy forage crops now for 12 years, which has reduced greenhouse gas emissions by up to 80 percent," Giacomazzi said.

The practice results in fewer tractor passes in the field and more organic material being left in the ground.

Another promising area for Kings County farms and dairies is solar power. Three large dairies in Kings are in the process of installing one-megawatt solar panel arrays this year. More dairy operations are likely to follow their example.

Giacomazzi said he hopes that the state will continue to provide incentives as it gets more ambitious with its greenhouse gas reduction targets.

"We need more bills like this that are geared toward the benefit of agriculture," he said. "We appreciate when the legislators understand how difficult it is to farm in the state of California."

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