

Cap-and-trade funds need to support rural solutions

CLOSE TO HOME

By

PAUL DOLAN AND RENATA BRILLINGER

Gov. Jerry Brown recently signed Assembly Bill 398, which extends cap-and-trade, California's cornerstone climate change program, through 2030. The program requires the largest emitters of greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., the oil and gas industry, cement plants, large food processors) to cut their emissions. Without putting a price on carbon, we are unlikely to meet our climate change goals, the most ambitious in the country. The state Legislature and governor will now debate how to budget billions of dollars in cap-and-trade revenue. In the past three years, California has invested more than \$3 billion of cap-and-trade funds in our communities to accelerate the transition toward a clean energy economy. In January, Governor Brown proposed an additional \$2.2 billion for the 2017-18 fiscal year.

To date, the money has been invested across California on projects that reduce emissions by weatherizing homes, installing solar panels, improving public transportation, building transit-oriented housing and more. In addition to these urban strategies, the state has also embraced sustainable agricultural solutions to climate change.

Since 2014, nearly \$200 million has been granted to farmers and ranchers to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to store carbon on their land. The country's first Climate Smart Agriculture programs are demonstrating to the world that farmers and ranchers can be leaders in climate innovation.

Among these is the country's first farmland conservation program aimed at combating climate change by permanently protecting our finite agricultural lands from urban sprawl development. So far, 33,000 acres have been protected. Another program rewards farmers and ranchers for management practices that conserve water, save energy and reduce associated greenhouse gas emissions. Almost 600 projects have been implemented, and this year farmer demand exceeded available funds by more than 400 percent.

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Two new climate smart agriculture programs are launching this summer, both with the potential to benefit North Coast farmers and communities. An alternative manure management practices program will award grants to dairy producers for manure management projects that reduce potent methane emissions. This region is home to many innovative dairy producers, including a large portion of the state's organic dairies, and they stand to gain from the program's incentives, implementing changes that also improve air and water quality.

Also, a healthy soils program will support farmers and ranchers in improving soil health in ways that remove carbon dioxide from our atmosphere and store it in soils and trees. Farmers and ranchers will do this by transitioning to more sustainable practices like the use of compost, mulch, cover crops as well as hedgerow plantings and riparian restoration. These practices can also improve air and water quality and increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat. Many of our North Coast producers are leaders in soil management and can lead the way with the support of this program.

To date the state's funding for the Climate Smart Agriculture programs has been important but modest. With the extension of cap-and-trade, we have the opportunity to expand and deepen our efforts to reach out to the more than 76,000 California farms and ranches.

The elected representatives in this area — state Sens. Bill Dodd and Mike McGuire and Assemblymembers Jim Wood, Marc Levine and Cecilia Aguiar- Curry — understand the importance of engaging and supporting farmers and ranchers as partners in addressing climate change. They will soon have a chance to weigh in on the cap-and-trade budget debates.

This is an exciting time for California. Innovation and creativity in all arenas of human activity are required to make the transformational changes necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to a changing climate. It is important that California's model includes rural solutions and that it supports a willing community of farmers prepared to do their part.