

# BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS: COORDINATING AGRICULTURE CLIMATE ACTION ACROSS PROGRAMS

## PLATFORM RECOMMENDATIONS AT-A-GLANCE

- Prioritize Investments in Regional Leadership and Collaboration
- Build on Existing Interdisciplinary Programs to Catalyze Innovation
- Develop Cooperative Agreements with Local Providers, Incentivize Innovation
- Increase Regulatory Streamlining To Achieve Multi-Benefits

### A CLIMATE PLATFORM FOR CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE

This is one in a series of CalCAN policy briefs that describe approaches to moving California agriculture boldly and quickly toward a carbon-neutral and climate-resilient future. Together, they make up *A Climate Platform for California Agriculture*.

Access the full report at: [calclimateag.org/ca-agriculture-climate-platform](https://calclimateag.org/ca-agriculture-climate-platform)

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## INTRODUCTION

Breaking down silos across government programs is not a new concept but one that will be critical to achieving improved climate resilience. In the early years of California's Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA) programs the focus was exclusively on climate change mitigation—how to reduce GHG emissions and increase carbon sequestration. Now there is greater understanding among experts in the field that to remain viable farmers and ranchers will have to adapt to significant and recurring extreme weather events at the same time as they reduce emissions.<sup>151</sup> To achieve this, the state needs to support improved climate resilience in holistic ways and often across program areas.

The elimination of programmatic silos can also ease the burden of program administration for state agencies and make the programs more accessible, especially for underserved producers. Over the years, CalCAN has worked with partners on CSA program implementation issues and we have written extensively about the need to improve coordination across state programs and with federal partners as well as increase regional capacity to support improved implementation.<sup>152</sup> Today, those needs feel even more urgent as the state looks to scale up this work and address growing climate impacts.



Assemblymember Jim Wood at a soil health farm tour in Sebastopol, CA.



<sup>151</sup> Lengnick, L. (2018). [Introduction to climate resilience in agriculture](#). SARE.

<sup>152</sup> For program specific reviews see <https://calclimateag.org/publications/>.

## FINDINGS

### Partnership Across State and Federal Agencies, Stakeholders Needed

We heard in our interviews that there is interest among state and federal agencies to coordinate and share information to support agency efforts to scale up climate-resilient agriculture. They recognized that state and federal partners have different strengths. Most notably, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has the “boots on the ground” capacity that state agencies like the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) do not have. One interviewee described NRCS as having a focus on “building long-term relationships” with producers and the state's efforts as often being “one-and-done.” However, CDFA and other state agencies have been quicker to respond to the climate crisis than federal partners.

The interest in improved coordination is most evident with the recent Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed between CDFA, CA NRCS, UCANR (UC Agriculture and Natural Resources), and CARCD (California Association of Resource Conservation Districts). The parties to the MOA meet weekly to review technical assistance (TA) delivery issues and opportunities, looking for ways that they can streamline and support each other's efforts. The MOA represents an important acknowledgment of the need to break down silos and work across state, federal, and local agencies and stakeholders to achieve climate resilience in agriculture. We heard that translating the MOA to additional regional coordination will be key to its success.

### State and Federal Partners Agree to Collaborate on Conservation Technical Assistance

In November 2022, CDFA, working with partners UCANR, CARCD, and California's NRCS, developed an MOA to strengthen the delivery of conservation technical assistance to the state's farmers and ranchers.<sup>153</sup> The MOA states, “The Parties recognize by working together, they can pool resources and have more impact on addressing natural resource issues such as water quality, drought resiliency, healthy forests, healthy soils, and the existential threat of climate change.” The MOA outlines six key focus areas of work for the partners:

- Equity in the Delivery of Technical Assistance
- Conservation Innovation and Practice Adoption
- Coordination
- Technical Capacity
- Maintain Consistent Locally Led Technical Assistance
- Collective Impact and Communication

There are examples of this kind of coordination happening at the regional level now, such as the North Coast Soil Hub,<sup>154</sup> which is a partnership of the region's Resource Conservation Districts, NRCS field offices, Cooperative Extension, the Santa Rosa Junior College, Carbon Cycle Institute, and farmers and other agriculture professionals in the area. For more on how this work is expanding, see the section [Expanding Technical Assistance to Support On-Farm Climate Resilience](#).

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<sup>153</sup> USDA NRCS. [Memorandum of agreement between CDFA, CARCD, UC ANR and USDA/NRCS](#).

<sup>154</sup> For more on the North Coast Soil Hub, see here <https://soilhub.org/>.





Compost made from dairy manure and almond prunings.

## New Partnerships and Expanded Demand With Block Grants

Across several programs,<sup>155</sup> CDFA is attempting to improve program delivery, expand its capacity to efficiently distribute high volumes of funds, and strengthen local partnerships by shifting from individual producers applying directly to CDFA for program funding to a block grant approach where CDFA funds regional partners who then deliver grants directly to producers.

This new approach has already expanded the number of farmer-serving organizations engaged in the programs and revealed untapped demand for the programs. For example, the recent SWEEP block solicitation received applications from 34 organizations requesting a total of \$157 million. This demand is nearly four times larger than the available funding (\$40 million) and nearly two times larger than the previous record demand (\$83 million) in 2021. Many of the 34 organizations that applied are irrigation districts and producer associations that are well-positioned to support their farmer members and expand the reach of the SWEEP program.

As with any new approach, there have been a few growing pains that need to be tended to. We heard from some of the interviewees familiar with the new California Underserved and Small Producer (CUSP) Program block grant that there was some confusion on the ground. For example, we heard that farmers in one region had applied to one local administrator of a CUSP grant, and when they did not hear back in a timely way, the farmers applied to a different local administrator, not realizing that it was the same CDFA program. We also heard the concern from several interviewees that the block grant approach did not adequately compensate partner organizations for the resources needed to adequately administer the grant programs or take into account regional needs. One interviewee noted that CDFA had improved the compensation for block grant recipients under the Pollinator Habitat Program, making it possible for some to apply.

## Limited Capacity Hampers Response to New Climate Funding

The increase in state and federal funding for climate and agriculture projects is a great opportunity but it has also presented challenges for state and local partners that lack staff capacity. We heard that often the new grant funds come with short turnaround times to apply, requiring agency and partner organizations to drop their regular work and focus on quickly developing projects for new requests for proposals. This can hurt ongoing projects and result in new projects that would benefit from more input and development. One technical assistance interviewee commented, “The past three years we have seen huge funding streams but institutions are not equipped to take on that funding .... We have to drop everything and can’t do regular work to apply for the programs. We don’t have the leadership structures to make these investments.”

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<sup>155</sup> Examples of CDFA programs that are incorporating block grants include the [California Underserved and Small Producer Program](#), HSP and SWEEP (both of which began block grants in 2023), and the [Pollinator Habitat Program](#).





Demonstration of water infiltration with different soil types.

## Regional Efforts Need Greater Support, Flexibility to Innovate

We heard from some of the interviewees that they were interested in seeing climate-related funding focus on investing in local and regional efforts to work with farmers. “To get agriculture to the table,” one interviewee discussed the need to have funding at the local level to develop partnerships. Another interviewee said, “We need programs with more flexibility for farmers to experiment. Right now programs are too rigid and hard to manage. Free people up to experiment and find what works for you. Get rid of silos and cross purposes.” Some interviewees find the prescribed nature of state programs too limiting and difficult to adjust to local realities.

## Regulatory Reform Still Needed

We continue to hear about the need to avoid conflicting state regulatory efforts to remove barriers to climate-resilient agriculture. Some progress has been made. For example, the Central Coast Water Resources Control Board (WRCB), in its latest revision of its Ag Order, now incentivizes healthy soil practices including cover crops and compost applications.<sup>156</sup> Progress has also been made on groundwater recharge efforts in agriculture with the work of DWR’s Flood-MAR (flood-managed aquifer recharge).<sup>157</sup> On the composting front, CDFA has partnered with U.S. EPA and others to streamline resources and information sharing about on-farm compost regulatory issues.<sup>158</sup> But more is needed if we are to truly overcome barriers to on-farm practices that conserve natural resources and move away from fossil fuel-based inputs. The Central Coast WRCB is the exception and not the rule when it comes to the Irrigated Regulatory Lands Program, which continues to try to fit organic producers into a regulatory scheme not set up for those who do not use synthetic fertilizers.

<sup>156</sup> California Water Boards. (2021, April 16). [Central Coast Regional Water Board adopts general waste discharge requirements for discharges from irrigated lands](#) [Press release].

<sup>157</sup> California Department of Water Resources. [Flood-managed aquifer recharge \(Flood-MAR\)](#).

<sup>158</sup> CDFA. [California's healthy soils initiative: On-farm compost resources](#).



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Prioritize Investments in Regional Leadership and Collaboration**

The new MOA on technical assistance is a great start. But to achieve its goals, the work of the MOA cannot stop at the headquarters level but must reach staff working regionally. It will be important to provide training and opportunities for coordination at the regional level so that all agency staff and TA providers are aware of the diversity of the state and federal programs that can support farmers and partners. Some of this work has already begun as we highlighted in our North Coast example above. Creating those local “pods” of partners across CDFA, NRCS, RCDs, and UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) along with nonprofit partners requires intentional relationship building. State leaders can support this work by hosting regional meetings, webinars, and trainings to further regional coordination and by investing in regional staff resources.

Additionally, we heard there is a need to have local leadership and capacity building to support the influx of climate program funds. State and federal leaders in UCCE, CARCD, and NRCS, in partnership with CDFA, should consider how they can improve the capacity for local offices to be prepared for these new program areas.

### **Build on Existing Interdisciplinary Programs to Catalyze Innovation**

Throughout this section and in many others, we heard from interviewees about the need for greater coordination and interdisciplinary collaboration at the regional and state level. Whether tackling regulatory streamlining, regional waste management, land use planning related to solar siting or at the urban/rural interface, there was a call for breaking down silos and moving from single practice incentives to integrated innovation. We identified a need for a Center for Climate and Agriculture Innovation to be a catalyst and convenor to connect the many existing programs and leaders in the public and private sectors to realize the full potential of climate-resilient agriculture. The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP) is a statewide program that, with additional investments, could serve as the foundation for a center like this.

### **Develop Cooperative Agreements With Local Providers, Incentivize Innovation**

We support CDFA’s efforts to move toward block grants to administer program funding at the regional level, but it will be important to adequately compensate regional administrators. CDFA should consider cooperative agreement models such as that used by NRCS as well as in other sectors to see what works and what does not work. Such cooperative agreements should not take a one-size-fits-all approach but should consider the regional needs and capacity of the local partners. Such agreements can also support regional innovation and the leadership of local partners as they support farmers in their area with implementing program goals, overcoming barriers to adoption, and fostering innovation. For example, building in flexibility with the use of funds by regional partners could result in purchasing compost application and cover crop equipment to be shared by farmers. This approach is currently being explored through CDFA’s Healthy Soils Program block grant pilot, and we recommend CDFA consider how to expand this approach to other programs.

### **Increase Regulatory Streamlining to Achieve Multi-Benefits**

The state should continue to look for opportunities to streamline regulatory programs and avoid conflicting efforts. For example, the CDFA on-farm compost efforts should continue beyond information sharing to reducing regulatory barriers to on-farm compost use (see the section [Dairy Manure Management: Moving from Waste Problem to Climate Solution](#)). At the top of the list for consideration should be the state’s Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program and supporting regional water boards in developing incentives for healthy soil practices, as the Central Coast Board has done. Regulatory streamlining must provide multiple benefits to farmers, the environment, and public health, and this triple bottom line can bring multiple stakeholders together if resources are provided to develop innovative solutions.

