

We Must Make the Best Use of the Farm Bill

The 2007 Farm Bill, a \$286 billion measure, is in the works and California agriculture stands to benefit from millions of dollars in funding for research, market promotion, and conservation. Only eleven percent of all federal monies under the previous Farm Bill came to California farmers, even though the state is the nation's leading ag producer. The pending Farm Bill will provide more than \$1.5 billion to our state's specialty crop industry—an industry largely neglected by previous farm bills.

In addition to a market-oriented approach to the promotion of California's specialty crop industry, the Farm Bill dedicates hundreds of millions in additional funding to conservation spending—California is the second largest recipient of federal conservation dollars, so this means our state's farmers and ranchers stand to gain.

For the past ten years, millions of federal dollars have been made available to aid our state's farmers and ranchers for conservation of their land, but a burdensome permitting process has led to only a fraction of the available funds being spent. The 2007 Farm Bill will increase Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding by 59% from \$1.3 billion to \$2 billion—we must make sure that our farmers are able to spend it.

Unfortunately, the permits that must be obtained in order to take advantage of federal funding pose a large burden to farmers participating in Farm Bill conservation programs. Obtaining permits is both costly and time-consuming and many times, the state and local agencies are not on the same page leading to more bureaucratic delays. These barriers are exactly why I've introduced Assembly Bill 1074, which would streamline the process for permit approval of conservation and restoration projects so that California farmers may take full advantage of conservation funding.

The amount of EQIP funding available versus the amount that is used clearly illustrates the need for reform. In 2005 Contra Costa County received \$411,791 but only authorized spending of \$24,896—only six percent of the total.

We must eliminate barriers to the conservation of California's farm land and rangeland. It is important that the money intended for California's farmers and ranchers actually makes it into the hands of those men and women that feed our state and our nation.

Assemblyman Guy Houston represents the 15th Assembly District, which includes the communities of Oakley, Brentwood, Knightsen, Discovery Bay, Byron, and Bethel Island.