

Nevada County is securing the 'Future of Ag' with \$500,000 grant for conservation planning

Nevada County Resource Conservation District (NCRCD) and the County of Nevada have come together to secure a historic \$500,000, 3-year planning grant through the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program. The grant will fund a comprehensive Agricultural and Working Landscape Conservation Plan.

This grant is part of the California Strategic Growth Council's (SGC) more than \$116 million in SALC grants approved earlier this year to permanently protect approximately 50,500 acres of croplands and rangelands, as well as lands utilized by California Native American tribes for the cultivation of traditional resources.

The goal for Nevada County is to create a comprehensive Agricultural and Working Landscape Conservation Plan, which will focus on identifying areas for conservation planning and related programs in collaboration with Bear Yuba Land Trust, Sierra Harvest, and the Nevada County Farm Bureau. The last plan of this caliber was enacted in 1995.

NCRCD Executive Director Briana Bacon says, "This plan will provide the framework, collaboration, and policies necessary to ensure that conserving agricultural lands is essential in addressing climate change and food security. It will also ensure that the farming and ranching lifestyle will be sustainable, equitable, and preserved for the community for many more generations."

Agriculture has always been an integral part of Nevada County, but the last 28 years have been a time of considerable change. Land prices have escalated rapidly and the pressure to subdivide large tracts of historical farmland has increased dramatically. Additionally, a significant portion of large-scale ranches and homesteads are owned by a select number of families, many of whom don't have children to pass their legacy down to, and those that do have someone to take the helm, are questioning the economic return on investment, given the drastic increase in the cost of living and the challenge to provide a viable lifestyle for themselves and the community.

Farmers and ranchers expected to retire at record rates

According to the Nevada County Department of Agriculture 2022 Crop Report, 365 farms and ranches are within the county lines, of which 7,760 acres are farmland, 133,393 acres are grazing land, and 3,313 acres are harvested cropland. The number of landowners that can actively work the land are expected to retire in large numbers over the next several years. Succession planning regarding the future land stewardship of this agricultural land is imperative for the future sustainability of Nevada County.

As the population ages, a majority of the county's open space land and previous agricultural land is under threat of development.

"With the aging population, Nevada County's open spaces and agricultural lands are increasingly at risk of being lost to development. Conservation easements are a crucial tool in our efforts to protect these lands, ensuring they remain preserved for agriculture and open space, regardless of ownership changes. By securing these easements, we can safeguard our rural landscape and agricultural heritage.."

-Erin Tarr, Executive Director, Bear Yuba Land Trust

The Agricultural Working Landscape Plan will address these risks by collaborating with partner organizations to take an inventory of the properties within the county. A comprehensive data tool will be researched, and over the three years, there will be several community-wide planning meetings that will result in these four components: a) Agricultural Economic Development Strategy; b) Land Use Policy Strategy; c) Agricultural Climate Resiliency Strategy; d) Education and Awareness Strategy.

"Nevada County's Department of Agriculture is dedicated to sustaining a healthy agricultural industry while protecting the environment, the agricultural workforce, and the community. Creation of this plan is key to analyzing the current agricultural and conservation policies and providing recommendations for updates to the general plan."Chris de Nijs, Nevada County Agricultural Commissioner

Food security

Multiple variables are affecting the sustainability of agriculture in the region. The Nevada County Food Policy Council, comprised of a diverse group of stakeholders, conducted a food assessment of the region to establish a baseline for the regional food system, looking at data from 2015-2020. Less than 4% of the annual value of food consumed by Nevada County residents is produced within the county. Supporting agriculture is vital to ensure economic vitality, improve food security and ensure that the regional resources remain sustainable for generations.

"The Nevada County Food Policy Council's assessment highlights the critical need for county-wide policies that support local agriculture. By strengthening our regional food system, we can enhance economic vitality, improve food security, and preserve our agricultural resources for future generations."

-Amanda Hixon, Farm Institute Director, Sierra Harvest

Climate change & Agriculture

"Climate change poses significant challenges to our agricultural economy, impacting crop yields, water availability, and overall farm productivity. By investing in resilient agricultural practices and supporting local farmers, we can mitigate these effects and ensure the long-term sustainability of our agricultural sector." Kimberly Parker, Economic Development Office, County of Nevada

"Our farmers are on the front lines of climate change, facing unpredictable weather patterns and shifting growing seasons. It's imperative that we adopt adaptive strategies and provide the necessary resources to help our agricultural community thrive in the face of these challenges."

-Deborah Totoonchie, Manager, Nevada County Farm Bureau

The ecosystem of Nevada County is rich in grassland biodiversity, and protecting those grasslands from development and conversion is essential to maintaining the health of the lower elevations of the county. Educational opportunities will be provided for farmers and ranchers to encourage sustainable land use practices, which could include but are not limited to scaling up healthy soil practices, increasing groundwater recharge, integrating pest management practices and enhancing circular economies for organic waste, increasing regenerative practices such as rangeland planting, riparian restoration, grazing and livestock management for fire resiliency.

Nevada County Resource Conservation District's mission is to promote responsible resource management within the jurisdiction through education, leadership, technical assistance, and project facilitation. The vision is to educate and assist landowners and land managers and youth populations in establishing a balance between a high-quality rural environment, a biologically diverse landscape, and a healthy economy for the community. The AWLCP will involve collaboration with critical partners and community members to assess and address the needs of the rural county.

Funds for the Agricultural Lands Conservation Planning Grant were made available through the California Strategic Growth Council's Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC) in collaboration with the Department of Conservation. SALC is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment- particularly in disadvantaged communities.