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Alliance would build up area ag

By Cory Golden/Enterprise staff writer

WOODLAND - A Santa Rosa-based nonprofit organization tentatively agreed Wednesday to provide \$25,000 in services to kick-start an agricultural futures alliance in Yolo County.

SPORTS

- Local Sports
- Aggies
- Blue Devils
- Kings
- River Cats

Michael Dimock, chief executive officer of the Ag Innovations Network, said he was "99 percent committed" to making Yolo the second county in which the organization has led discussions between farmers, environmentalists and other parties to "grapple with the challenges of sustainable agriculture."

CLASSIFIEDS

- Automotive
- Dial-A-Pro
- Employment
- Merchandise
- Place an ad
- Real estate

"I think this is a county we would want to engage, for sure," he told a meeting of 14 people at the County Agriculture Building. Those on hand, invited by Ag Commissioner Rick Landon, included farmers and representatives of groups as diverse as the Yolo Land Trust, Davis Farmers' Market, Ducks Unlimited and the League of Women Voters.

ENTERTAINMENT

- Art
- Books
- Feature stories
- Movies
- Music
- Theater
- Travel
- Video games
- Wine

Initially, the project would be backed by the Roots of Change Fund, 14 foundations attempting to boost sustainable agriculture in California.

Landon said he was encouraged by the prospect of a new alliance, which likely would include representatives of about two dozen stakeholders, and by its potential for building public support. It would begin meeting monthly next fall, Dimock said.

COLUMNISTS

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- Matt O'Donnell
- Tanya Perez
- Rich Rifkin
- Elisabeth Sherwin
- Wendy Weitzel
- Contributors

"I hope that we are attacking it soon enough," Landon said. "I think people are beginning to be aware - you can't solve a problem without being aware - but I hope we're not too late. (Agriculture) is certainly on the ropes. ... We've got to start seeing some action, some positive changes."

Similar efforts have been springing up across the county to address issues from development to budget cuts and new, stricter environmental regulations. Meetings have taken place between environmentalists and farmers, conservation professionals and at a county-led agribusiness summit.

Dimock and Susan Johnson of the Ventura Ag Commissioner's Office laid out a blueprint of how such an alliance has worked there over the past five years.

OPINION

- Letters
- Local editorials
- Op-ed
- Submit a letter

Where once environmentalists, labor activists and farmers only "threw bombs" through the media, in government meeting rooms or courtrooms, Johnson said they have come together to write white papers that led to new local ordinances on pesticide use, farm worker housing and land preservation.

FORMS

- Anniversary
- Birth
- Classified ad
- Engagement
- Gift subscription
- News tip
- Obituary
- Photo order
- Press release
- Submit a letter
- Subscribe
- Vacation Stop
- Wedding

For example: 90 schools in her county are within a quarter-mile of a working farm; in response to concerns about pesticide use near them, the Ventura alliance drafted guidelines about where growers could spray and fostered coordination between farmers and schools about when spraying would take place.

"It definitely changed the face of Ventura County," Johnson said. "We were very polarized ... and yet, lo and behold, here we are."

ABOUT US

- Advertising

Dimock said legal and ballot box battles are expensive and hurt the image of the industry. Better, then, he said, to build on a common

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LOCAL LINKS

interest in a healthy future, seek win-win solutions and develop working personal relationships.

Those at Wednesday's meeting said that they hoped an alliance would help bring other budding partnerships together in an efficient way. Unlike the situation described in Ventura - where environmentalists and farmers were at each other's throats - many interested parties in Yolo County largely agree on fundamental issues, but are limited by time and resources.

The challenge, those present said, is putting them together in a room and taking advantage of all they can do to try to preserve the viability of farming and protect open space and habitat.

"If this process could convince these different groups to work together, that would be tremendous," said Vance Russell, program manager for Audubon California's Farm and Rangeland Stewardship Program. "But with the caveat that something needs to happen pretty quickly."

Farmer Charlie Rominger agreed, saying a working process, if timely and productive, would be "great." He emphasized educating the public about agricultural issues.

"We need to save the opportunity to farm, then develop the markets," he said.

Local growers Mike Beeman and Nancy Lea also expressed interest in the alliance, but said they were not encouraged by the state of ag in the county.

Beeman said he felt as though farmers were viewed as "dinosaurs" who do nothing but create noise and dust, spray pesticides and don't pay their workers enough.

"I just don't see the viability in farming," he said. "It's just not there."

Lea said farmers had witnessed a "sea change" in local elected officials, who she said were once more committed to agriculture. She cited recent pro-growth moves by the Woodland City Council as one example.

"As Yolo County has become more and more urbanized, agriculture has less of a voice," she said.

Dimock said he understood their concerns, but said he believed that community cooperation could lead eventually to change at the state, national and even international level.

"The question is, 'Is there enough faith left to try it?' " he said. "That's the heart of the matter."

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