

Date of Hearing: March 15, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
Robert Rivas, Chair
AB 406 Connolly – As Amended March 9, 2023

SUBJECT: Agriculture: Healthy Soils Program: organic production

SUMMARY: This bill expands the Healthy Soils Program (HSP) to include the funding of organic farming projects and provide grant to incentivize organic production, including transition to organic projects as specified. Specifically, *this bill*:

- 1) Allows CDFA to expand HSP’s farm demonstration project to include organic farming projects.
- 2) Requires CDFA to support and incentivize organic production by providing grants of up to five years to certified organic farmers and ranchers, and during farmers’ or ranchers’ three-year organic transition period.
 - a) Requires CDFA prioritize applicants who propose to implement multiple healthy soils practices and certified organic farmer or rancher applicants.
- 3) Requires CDFA, if it includes organic farming project, to include technical assistance to the project.
- 4) Requires CDFA, if it includes organic farming project, to establish a technical advisory committee to review organic farming project applications for scientific validity, as specified.
- 5) Requires CDFA to provide grants of up to five years for on-farm demonstration projects.
- 6) Defines “certified organic farmer or rancher” to mean a farmer or rancher certified organic pursuant to the federal Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (7 U.S.C. Sec. 6501 et seq.).
- 7) Requires CDFA, on or before January 1, 2026, to submit a report to the Legislature on how the HSP incentivizes farmers and ranchers to implement multiple healthy soils practices, including incentivizing farmers and ranchers to transition to organic production.
 - a) Repeals the report requirement on January 1, 2030.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Cannella Environmental Farming Act of 1995 which requires CDFA to oversee HSP to seek to optimize management practices contribute to healthy soils and result in net long-term on-farm greenhouse gas benefits. *Food and Ag Code (FAC) 560 - 570*
- 2) Authorizes HSP to also include the funding of on-farm demonstration projects that further the goals of the program. *FAC 569*

- 3) Requires the CDFA, if it elects to fund those on-farm demonstration projects, to establish a technical advisory committee to review those applications for scientific validity and the proposed projects potential to achieve greenhouse gas benefits. *FAC 569*

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: The HSP stems from the California Healthy Soils Initiative, a collaboration of state agencies and departments to promote the development of healthy soils on California's farmlands and ranchlands. The HSP has two components: the HSP Incentives Program and the HSP Demonstration Projects. The HSP Incentives Program provides financial assistance for implementation of conservation management that improve soil health, sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The HSP Demonstration Projects showcase California farmers and rancher's implementation of HSP practices. The HSP offers grants that include but are not limited to, on farm management practices that include but are not limited to: cover cropping, no-till, reduced-till, mulching, compost application, and conservation plantings. HSP has awarded 940 projects for 2021, totaling \$66,311,937.32.

According to California Certified Organic Farmers, healthy soils are critical to climate change mitigation with the world's soils capturing up to 25 percent of annual fossil fuel emissions. Certified organic production is the only farming system where federal law requires farmers to maintain or improve soil health. Healthy soils are indicated by high levels of soil organic matter (SOM), a component of soil where living microbes break down plant and animal materials into plant foods and stored nutrients, including carbon. Long-term comparison trials across the United States show that organic farming significantly increases SOM. One of the largest studies comparing organic and conventional soils in 48 states found that organic farms have 13 percent higher SOM than conventional farms. Significantly higher SOM allows organic soils to store more carbon than non-organic soils and provides numerous other climate benefits.

This bill will include organic farmers under HSP, which will make them eligible to receive grants and incentives through it. It will also help farmers who wish to become certified organic. Produce can be called organic if it is certified to have grown on soil that had no prohibited substances applied for three years prior to harvest. Prohibited substances include most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. In instances when a grower has to use a synthetic substance to achieve a specific purpose, the substance must first be approved according to criteria that examine its effects on human health and the environment. Moving from conventional to organic farming can be expensive and that is a barrier to many farmers, including socially disadvantaged farmers, low resource farmers and other marginalized groups. This bill can offer assistance to farmers by helping cover the cost of the organic certification process.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Agricultural Institute of Marin
All STAR Organics
California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF)
Cardoza & Cardoza Farming Co.
Center for Food Safety; the
Health Care Without Harm

Lucero Organic Farms
Mandela Partners
Pesticide Action Network North America
Sunblaze Ranch

Opposition

None on file

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