



NEWS RELEASE

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CA. DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION SOLICITS HIGH-SPEED RAIL FARMLAND MITIGATION PROPOSALS

SACRAMENTO – The California Department of Conservation (DOC) is now accepting proposals to offset farmland loss associated with the California high-speed rail alignment through the Central Valley. DOC will work with local land trusts and other organizations to identify landowners willing to create permanent agricultural easements on land comparable to that taken out of production.

“The High-Speed Rail Authority realizes the importance of agriculture to California, and has made mitigating the loss of farming and ranching land a priority,” said John Lowrie, head of DOC’s Division of Land Resource Protection. “We are partnering with them in this effort and will use our existing program and contacts in the agricultural community to help ensure that California remains the nation’s most productive agricultural state.”

“The Authority is committed to working with local, state and federal agencies and stakeholders to develop a high-speed rail system that preserves open spaces and environmental resources that make California golden,” said Mark McLoughlin, Director of Environmental Services for the Authority. “Partnering with the Department of Conservation ensures that agricultural conservation easements are established to preserve important farmland for agricultural use.”

DOC’s California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP) will secure easements on behalf of the Authority. Established in 1996, the CFCP has funded 172 conservation easements, permanently conserving more than 57,000 acres of the high-quality agricultural land. More information about the CFCP can be found at www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/cfcp/mitigation/Pages/AgLandMitigation_HSRA.aspx.

An agricultural conservation easement is a voluntary, legally recorded deed restriction that supports long-term agricultural resource conservation by removing development pressures from the land. The

easements prohibit practices that would damage or interfere with the agricultural use of the land, and remain in effect even when the land changes ownership. Easements funded by the DOC-CFCP must be of a size and nature suitable for viable commercial agriculture.

“Landowners will be paid fair market value for the development potential of their property, as determined by independent real estate appraisers experienced in the valuation of agricultural land,” noted CFCP Manager Molly Penberth. “Although landowners who agree to an agricultural easement cannot develop their property, they can use proceeds to improve farming infrastructure, purchase additional land, and for financial or estate planning.”

Agricultural conservation easements are held by land trusts, other nonprofit organizations, or local governments, which are responsible for ensuring that the terms of the easement are upheld. The Authority will preserve at least one acre of agricultural land for each acre taken out of production. The Authority has \$20 million budgeted for farmland mitigation for the first phase of construction and will cover the entire easement purchase price, transaction costs, and a stewardship fund which supports the easement holder’s future costs.

“High-speed rail construction will begin in Fresno and Madera counties, so naturally that’s where we’re concentrating our initial efforts,” Penberth said. “At the same time, we’re interested in having preliminary conversations with potential easement-holders in other counties where the Authority plans to work in the near future, such as Kern, Kings, Merced, and Tulare.”

Penberth noted that landowners whose property will be impacted by the high-speed rail alignment will have a first opportunity of review for placing easements on other land they own. While all easements funded under the grant program must meet basic eligibility criteria, this provision provides an opportunity for those most affected by the rail project to protect their remaining property for future generations.

Other factors that will be considered include the location of the properties relative to the rail alignment, adjacency to other protected lands, and the potential to serve as community separators. The CFCP will work with eligible applicants to add to existing protected blocks of agricultural land whenever possible.

“Creating agricultural easements on two or more adjacent parcels tends to encourage additional landowner interest and sustainable agricultural use,” Penberth said. “Ultimately, our priority will be to permanently preserve land of the same quality as that being removed from production.”

By 2029, high-speed rail is expected to run between San Francisco and Los Angeles in under three hours at speeds capable of over 200 miles per hour. It is estimated that 5,000 acres of farmland will go out of production to accommodate the rail alignment and maintenance facilities.