

Free on-farm services offered to help protect water quality

By Kate Campbell

A couple of valuable free services are being offered to help Sacramento Valley tree crop farmers prepare for winter orchard management and protect water quality. The Coalition for Urban/Rural Environmental Stewardship (CURES) and Sutter County Resource Conservation District are offering free seeding and planting of filter strips and cover crops, as well as free on-site orchard sprayer calibrations.

But program managers say “please don’t call it free.” They say some people think “free” means having little value and they stress that’s not true for this program. Instead those who provide the cover crop and sprayer calibration services prefer to say they provide “no-cost” services and think what they do is highly valuable.

The program saves farmers money by reducing the amount of crop management materials they need to apply and helps protect water quality by reducing the amount of chemicals that find their way into drainage systems and waterways.

“More growers than ever are using the program,” said Larry Lloyd, Sutter County Resource Conservation District program manager. “So far this fall 400 acres of cover crops and filter strips have been planted in orchards of between 8 and 200 acres.

“Planting is scheduled for an additional 1,000 acres and my phones are ringing off the hook,” he said. “I’m staring at the calendar and we’ve also got 10 growers signed up for blast-sprayer calibration.

“We’re finding when we go out for one calibration a neighbor usually shows up. That’s good. We’d like it if three or four farmers went to the same place at the same time so we could help more people.”

Funded by a grant from the state Water Resources Control Board, the Sutter County Resource Conservation District will send a tractor, operator, seeder and seed to local orchards. All growers have to do is call. And, the same is true for calibration services. CURES will send state-of-the-art calibration equipment and a trained technician directly to the farm.

CURES Executive Director Parry Klassen said the services are being made available through funding from a three-year grant, which is now in its last year. He said it’s estimated that 1,400 growers in the Butte/Yuba/Sutter orchard corridor are eligible for the free services.

“The response to this program has been outstanding,” Klassen said. “So far this year more than 1,500 acres of plant filter strips and cover crops will be planted and during the course of this grant we’ve spent about \$30,000 on seeds.”

Interest in the program in past years had been disappoint-

ing, Klassen said, attributing the recent increase in grower participation to better understanding of the benefits of having cover crops growing during dormant spray periods. Other factors, he thinks, are the growing awareness of the irrigated lands waiver program and mounting pressure from state regulators.

“Cover crops are tricky because you don’t get much growth in December when crops need to be established and most of the dormant sprays go on in January and February,” Klassen said. “There’s not much time left for the grass to grow. The window of opportunity is closing. Another challenge is orchard management of cover crops.

“If you have almonds, you have to make sure the cover crop is mowed down before bloom,” he said. “Cover crops can cause lower temperatures, compared to bare ground. And, from the standpoint of looks, cover crops can make an orchard look a bit disheveled, which some farmers don’t like.”

But more and more growers are finding cover crops beneficial, Klassen said, and they’re finding that more precise sprayer calibration not only provides better targeted application of pest control materials, it can also reduce the amount needed by as much as 10 percent.

“All farmers in the service area have to do is place a call and set up an appointment and a technician will make an on-farm visit,” Klassen said.

While there, the technician will clean clogged strainers and nozzles, as well as replace worn or damaged nozzles. Nozzle output also will be compared with manufacturer’s specifications and fin angles will be adjusted to better direct spray.

“Sprayer calibration helps farmers do a better job of spraying, but that is only one way to help protect water quality,” Klassen said. “We like to use the toolbox analogy. Depending on the location of the orchard one tool might work or five might not be enough.”

Because CURES owns the sprayer calibration equipment, Klassen said there are plans to pursue sponsors to help underwrite the service, which would be expanded to include farmers in both the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

For information on free planting and seeds for filter strips and cover crops, call Larry Lloyd at (530) 674-1461, ext. 132. To sign up for free sprayer calibration, call Tamara Taliaferro at (530) 271-5822.

Online sign-up information is available at www.curesworks.org.

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