

THE CENTER SQUARE

California Senator introduces voluntary agricultural land repurposing bill

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By: Tom Joyce



(The Center Square) - U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla, D-California, introduced a bill that he hopes will bolster water supply.

Padilla introduced the Voluntary Agricultural Land Repurposing Act. It would provide funding to states that voluntarily repurpose certain agricultural lands.

Padilla filed the bill in response to the Colorado River Basin's water shortage, the Great Salt Lake's declining water supply, and groundwater overdraft in California's Central Valley, among other issues.

Padilla worries that if water shortages are not addressed, it will increase dust, pests, and weeds, negatively impacting the economy.

He thinks repurposing some agricultural lands can help mitigate the economic impact of drought while keeping the industry productive.

"Agriculture is essential to California's economy and allows us to put food on the table for families across the country, but the climate crisis and historic droughts require us to adapt to long-term water scarcity," Padilla said in a press release. "My Voluntary Agricultural Land Repurposing Act will provide another tool for communities to support the collaborative planning and voluntary actions already underway to reduce water use in the West. This legislation embraces state and local

ingenuity and long-term land use planning while ensuring that our agricultural economies remain vibrant for years to come.”

The bill would do the following, according to the release:

- Modernize the Bureau of Reclamation’s emergency drought authority to authorize funding for states and tribes to run voluntary and multibenefit land repurposing programs. States would match the federal grant at a 50% cost-share. Eligible state-run programs must be basin-scale, reduce consumptive water use, repurpose irrigated agricultural land for at least 10 years, and provide one or more other measurable benefits to the environment or community, including restoring habitat or flood plains connection to streams or rivers, creating dedicated recharge areas, creating parks or recreation areas, facilitating renewable energy projects, and other listed uses.
- Amend the Bureau of Reclamation’s WaterSMART program to authorize funding for the multibenefit land repurposing activities described above. This would allow additional water users and partners to engage in multibenefit land repurposing programs while states work to stand up state-run programs.
- Prioritize programs that provide direct benefits to disadvantaged communities or were developed through a multi-stakeholder planning process.

This bill has received endorsements from the following entities: Environmental Defense Fund, Trout Unlimited, the State Water Contractors, Self-Help Enterprises, Audubon, The Native Seed Group, California Native Seed Supply Collaborative, Arroyo Pasajero Mutual Water Company, East Turlock Groundwater Sustainability Agency, East Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency, Woolf Farming, and McConnel Farms.

Ann Hayden, Associate Vice President of Climate Resilient Water Systems at the Environmental Defense Fund, praised the Senator for trying to solve the water shortage problem.

“We applaud Senator Padilla for introducing legislation that will give landowners options for how to manage limited water supplies in ways that can minimize economic impacts and create real benefits for communities and ecosystems,” Padilla said.

Sara Porterfield, Trout Unlimited’s Western Water Policy Advisor, said the proposal would benefit cattle ranchers.

“Trout Unlimited has worked with cattle ranchers across the West to sustain their operations while voluntarily reducing their irrigated footprint,” Porterfield said in the release. “The Voluntary Agricultural Land Repurposing Act provides support for this kind of locally-led, voluntary, compensated action that can help demonstrate long-term agriculture and water sustainability, a needed drought-response tool. Trout Unlimited supports the Voluntary Agricultural Land Repurposing Act.”

And Jennifer Pierre, General Manager of the State Water Contractors, thinks the bill would provide landowners with some water conservation flexibility.

“In a time of climate adaptation ... this bill provides another option for landowners to sustainably manage their lands to the benefit of their communities,” Pierre said.