

State's cash crisis threatens Yolo conservation education efforts

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On a chilly January morning, 27 students from Sacramento High School, traveled over an hour to the site of their class project - the Haag Family Farm, north of Esparto.

As part of their charter school's hands-on environmental science program, the students have worked since October planting hundreds of native trees, shrubs and grasses along the banks of the Haag's new farm pond.

Jim and Claire Haag have been growing insecticide-free walnuts in their orchards for over 20 years, and have recently been working with the Yolo County Resource Conservation District (Yolo County RCD) to develop a farm pond to provide wildlife and aquatic habitat, serve as a natural reservoir, and filter storm water run-off.

The students are part of the SLEWS Program, an innovative experiential learning program implemented by the nonprofit Center for Land-Based Learning, based out of Winters. SLEWS, or the Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship Program, engages high school students in year-long habitat restoration projects to enhance classroom learning, develop leadership skills and provide landowners with valuable assistance in habitat restoration on working farms and ranches.

While cold morning temperatures did nothing to dampen student's spirits as they installed a drip irrigation system to keep the hundreds of young native plants thriving, the State's cash crisis has put the skids on this, and many other local conservation projects.

In 2006, the state of California awarded Yolo County RCD a \$2.3 million grant to fund the Yolo-Solano Conservation Partnership for Habitat on Working Lands.

This program expands innovative projects already on the ground in Yolo and Solano counties, including farm ponds, stream habitat improvement and irrigation canal vegetation. The program brings together nearly a dozen organizations and researchers to complete projects on private lands.

In 2008, over a half-mile reach of irrigation canal was graded and replanted with riparian vegetation, and eight farm ponds were enhanced and stocked with Sacramento perch, in an effort to help to re-establish this native sunfish in local waterways.

On Dec. 17, the state suspended nearly all bond-funded grants and projects throughout California. The planting at the Haag Farm was the third of a series of five SLEWS field trips planned for the school year, but is likely to be the last, unless the cash crisis is resolved.

"The only way that we were able to complete the field trip today was through the generosity of donations from our partners and the Haags," said Nina Suzuki, SLEWS program director.

The state's action has hit the Yolo RCD especially hard with more than 70 percent of its funding coming from state Proposition money, according to Dan Efseaff, executive director for the Yolo County RCD.