

## Conservation cuts: District reduces hours, programs as funding freezes

By Jonathan Edwards | Enterprise staff writer | February 25, 2009 09:14



As part of SLEWS, a program run by the Center for Land-Based Learning, Davis High students work Friday on a conservation project at Bridgeway Farms. Here, students Jennie Lee Hawkins and Christine Mellon, along with Neal Thayer, coordinator of regional projects for SLEWS, carry native grass plugs. Sue Cockrell/Enterprise photo

If you call Dan Efseaff on a Thursday or Friday, he won't pick up:

'Hi. This is Dan. The Yolo (Resource Conservation District) is shifting toward an abbreviated schedule as we go through this budget crisis. We will have hours from Monday through Wednesday. Please be patient as it may take us some time to get back to you.'

Normally Efseaff and his 50 employees work to, let's say, eliminate invasive grasses along Cache Creek or help farmers keep as much high-quality water on their land by planting cover crops.

But in mid-December the state budget crisis froze bond funding, choking off about \$4.5 million to 85 percent of the district's projects.

And even though state lawmakers passed and signed a budget into law, state Treasurer Bill Lockyer warned the state would not sell bonds to investors for at least the next few weeks.

'It means good progress, Efseaff said, 'but it's going to take some time for them to reprime the pump and get out of the hole they've been in.'

Like all 10 of his employees, Efseaff has slashed his workload by half - from 40 to 20 hours, just trying to wait out the bond freeze.

As long as the district can hold onto its people, Efseaff said the future looks bright.

'We're all afraid of shutting down completely,' he went on. 'If we start losing people, they get new jobs and they move out of the area.'

'If we lose them, we don't have any other real assets. We have knowledge and can-do spirit, and that's about it.'

The Center for Land-Based Learning brings conservation districts such as the Yolo RCD together with local high schools to get students out on farms or ranches to learn about and execute conservation projects.

Mary Kimball, the center's executive director, had to stall nine of 17 conservation projects when \$75,000 in bond funding dried up.

Less money and fewer projects means less work. Kimball laid-off one full-time employee of her eight-person staff. And all her workers are furloughed two Fridays each month.

'(The budget passing) has not made one iota of difference,' she said.

'And there are thousands of organizations across the state,' Kimball continued, 'and we are just one little piece in that big puzzle.'

That could be a problem if conservation groups start shedding jobs and hard-fought institutional knowledge.

President Barack Obama's stimulus package could bring California billions of dollars for shovel-ready 'green' projects.

If conservation groups start laying off people, halted projects could deteriorate, said Diane Crumley, Yolo RCD's education and outreach coordinator. Then they would no longer be eligible for stimulus money earmarked for ready-to-go projects.

'By freezing these funds, the Legislature has basically starved the existing green job network on the vine,' Crumley went on.

Less quantifiable but perhaps more important are the relationships between conservationists and local farmers built over decades.

Many conservationists have worked in an area for more than 15 years, Crumley said. The conservation district has worked with some Yolo farmers for 50 years over multiple generations.

'Large organizations like UC Davis come to us because they have money and grants, but no way of getting permission from landowners to do the work on their property,' Crumley said. '(Those relationships) are not something we can just pick up in six months.'

Neal Thayer still has a job coordinating regional projects for SLEWS, a program run by the Center for Land-Based Learning.

On Friday, Thayer led about two dozen Davis High Students wearing knee-high rain boots and muddy hands to Bridgeway Farms, just off Kidwell Road in Dixon.

Shelly Sandberg's Chemistry in the Community class had been to the site before - to plant native trees, shrubs and grasses.

Friday was supposed to be the third in a series of five SLEWS days. But then the project's bond money evaporated.

'The kids really start to bond with a particular site,' Sandberg said. 'They get to see it change with the seasons. It helps the kids see a cycle.'

'It's too bad they can't come back here again,' she added.

Christine Mellon, a sophomore, was just happy to be out of the classroom, planting deer grass plugs one minute, installing a drip line irrigation system the next.

'A lot of things we don't get a handle on, because we haven't done it. We haven't seen it,' Christine said of a traditional classroom learning environment.

SLEWS takes the concepts and the plants off the page and makes them real. 'You can see them, touch them, smell them - whatever,' Christine continued. 'You understand it and see what's happening.'

- Reach Jonathan Edwards at [jedwards@davisenterprise.net](mailto:jedwards@davisenterprise.net) or (530) 747-8052. Comment on this story at [www.davisenterprise.com](http://www.davisenterprise.com)

315 G Street · Davis, CA 95616 · Main Office:(530)756-0800 · Circulation (530)756-0826 · FAX:  
(530)756-6707

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