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Environmentalist lauded for Valley ag ties

By Dennis Pollock / The Fresno Bee
07/19/07 04:24:07

The top official of a San Francisco environmental group has been honored for her efforts that include work with farmers and dairy operators in the central San Joaquin Valley and elsewhere on air and water quality issues.

"We'd rather be working with businesses in the field rather than against them in the courtroom," said Ashley Boren, executive director of Sustainable Conservation, as she accepted one of six leadership awards given Monday by the James Irvine Foundation in San Francisco.

Boren, head of the group for a decade, has been active in the agriculture industry on three fronts:

Working with farmers to cut air pollution in the central San Joaquin Valley by encouraging them to do "conservation tillage," a practice that requires fewer tractor passes to prepare soil for planting. That cuts down on dust as well as emissions from machinery.

A pilot project involving 16 farms cut dust pollution by more than 85% and reduced tractor fuel expenses nearly 74%.

Dino Giacomazzi, a Hanford dairy operator, uses a technique called "strip tilling" that narrows the piece of ground disturbed in tilling and planting. He said it not only saves fuel and cuts down on dust, but it also increases yields.

"Environmentalists and those in business may be at odds sometimes, but the reality is that environmental solutions can be -- and really have to be -- economically beneficial," Giacomazzi said.

Working with dairy operators and utility companies to reduce the impact of manure on the environment by encouraging development of methane digesters that generate electricity.

Jake De Raadt, a Lemoore dairy operator, has contracted with Pacific Gas & Electric Co. to supply power, but the machinery on his digester is not yet running at full capacity.

De Raadt said he was pleased to see Boren's enthusiasm for renewable energy and "all the potential out there."

Michael Marsh, who heads Western United Dairymen and has worked closely with Boren on methane digester projects, said she seeks to "find common-sense solutions to very complex regulatory problems."

He said Sustainable Conservation has "been a voice of reason toward agriculture; something not often heard."

Working with the nursery industry to address the problem of invasive species finding their way into the California landscape. A coalition of major retailers and nurseries has agreed to keep 21 of the most invasive types of garden and landscaping plants off store shelves.

They are also educating on noninvasive alternatives that can be planted.

Monrovia Nursery, which grows some plants near Woodlake, is among those involved in the project.

Boren said it has taken time to develop trust on the part of those in the farming industry.

"Historically, there has been a lot of animosity, and initially we were viewed with skepticism," she said. "We started by seeking to understand how these businesses operate and talking with trade associations."

Six people representing five organizations were honored at Monday's ceremonies. Each of the five organizations was awarded \$125,000 for "tackling pressing state issues that many considered intractable." After the ceremony, they met with Gov. Schwarzenegger.

Those honored, in addition to Boren, were:

Cesar Calderon with Soledad Enrichment Action High School of Los Angeles, a charter school focused on high-risk youths.

John Carlon and Tom Griggs with River Partners of Chico, who forged alliances among farmers, conservationists and government agencies to address risks of deteriorating levees.

Yvonne Chan, of Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Pacoima, a charter school that includes science and multimedia labs set up in former crack houses.

Sheldon Epps with the Pasadena Playhouse, which had a renaissance with an emphasis on diversity.

Boren said Sustainable Conservation will divide the money it will receive from the award, spending half of it working with farmers in the Valley to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and half on water quality in the coastal watershed.

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