

Cropland Idling

Issue No. 5a - DRAFT Alfalfa Idling

Background

Issue

In the past, the majority of the water transferred from the Sacramento Valley has been from rice field idling programs. With current high rice prices and environmental requirements that restrict the times that water can be transported through the Delta, it has been difficult to get rice growers to sign up any significant acreage in the transfer program.

Discussion

Alfalfa, which has been excluded from the transfers program in the past, offers a potential alternative crop for transfers. Alfalfa is a perennial crop that is often grown for 3-4 years until yields decline and the crop is taken out of production. If a grower were ready to renovate a block of alfalfa, this program could fit nicely into their plans.

Under an alfalfa transfer program, growers would irrigate and harvest their alfalfa following their typical practices in the spring and early summer. The alfalfa would then be completely disced under by July 1st to eliminate potential groundwater use resulting from the deep root system. The water the alfalfa would have used in July, August, and September would then be made available for transfer.

An alfalfa idling program potentially avoids some of the problems (timing, habitat) associated with rice transfers, eliminates any concern that the field would have been fallow absent the transfer program as alfalfa is rarely disced under halfway through the season; reduces third party impacts as growers are able to harvest the first 2-3 cuttings; and relatively simple to monitor requiring a check before and after the field is disced under.

A potential problem is that of determining the ETAW for alfalfa as it varies among regions. To avoid this problem, the proposed program would allow only alfalfa in the Sacramento Valley and exclude alfalfa grown in the foothills, in the Delta, in areas with high water tables, or land irrigated with water that does not come from the Sacramento or Feather Rivers or their tributaries. The place of use of the irrigation water must be in a location that makes it accountable and transferable through the SWP or the CVP.

Recommendation for 2010

Delta Water Transfers

No Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta alfalfa water transfers will be allowed in 2010 due to high hydraulic pressures (seepage) and subsequent weed growth.

North of American River Water Transfers

Fields must be disced on or prior to July 1 of transfer year.

Future Discussions for Long-Term Program

Discuss, study and resolve whether or not alfalfa grown in the Delta could qualify for this program.

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