Ag critical to success of countywide conservation plan, and ag’s unsure

By STEVE SCHOONOVER

Staff Writer

Implementation of the Butte Regional Conservation Plan would require the purchase of conservation easements on as much as 125,000 acres of Butte County farm and ranch land to offset the impacts of growth planned here.

When a farmer sells an easement, he agrees to keep the land in agriculture “into perpetuity” in exchange for a cash payment.

At January’s public workshop in Chico, Paul Cylinder of SAIC — the prime consultant on the plan — stressed that a main goal of the plan was to preserve the “working landscape” and allow farmers to keep farming.

The agricultural community is somewhat skeptical.

“ We’re definitely concerned about the plan,” said Butte County Farm Bureau Executive Director Colleen Cecil, primarily because ag is not a priority of the

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Ty Barbour/ Staff File Photo In this photo taken Sept.

22, 2009, Larry Mattson of Richvale harvests rice in a field along the Richvale Highway using his cousin's John Deere 9870 rice harvester. In addition to being a foundation of Butte County’s economy, rice farming provides important habitat for many of the 40 endangered and rare species the Butte Regional Conservation Plan seeks to protect.

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"The priorities are protecting habitat and species and making development easier. Ag is secondary," she explained.

And yet, the plan depends on ag.

The 50-year term of the plan is an issue, she said. Markets change. Rice is a money-maker now but what happens that far in the future can’t be predicted.

“Our concern is that when someone enters an agreement, do they have to keep growing rice for 50 years?” Cecil asks.

Well, no. Actually they and their successors have to keep growing rice forever.

Michael Thomas, division chief for habitat conservation at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Sacramento office, explains that if a development takes out a "giant garter snake playground," that habitat and those snakes are gone forever. The area preserved to compensate for that has to be forever as well.

If the bottom were to drop out of the rice market, “the plan has to figure out how to keep the farmer farming rice,” he said.

Thomas said the service wouldn’t take a stand on things like pesticide use to control the invasive weeds that tend to spring up periodically in rice country. Standard farmland management practices wouldn’t be barred.

The easements would be tailored, he said, “to keep people doing what they’re already doing.”

**AG AND HABITAT**

Rice would be the main crop impacted by the Regional Conservation Plan. The plan also has acreage targets in woodland and grassland areas where ranching and grazing are practiced.

Orchards are not affected because they have no habitat value for the 40 species the plan is trying to protect, according to Chris Devine, Butte County Association of Governments planning manager.

The remainder of the conservation acreage goals are in riparian areas along the county’s rivers and streams, in wetlands and open water.

Most of the ranching and grazing land in play has been used for that purpose and nothing else for 150 years. It’s what the land is suited for and it’s difficult to imagine another kind of agriculture thriving there. The idea of locking it into that kind of use forever is easy to imagine.

But rice requires far more water, far more manipulation of the landscape and far more expensive machinery. It’s linked into global commodity markets, government subsidies and California’s eternal water wars. Requiring someone to commit to that much cost, effort and risk — forever — may be a bit harder sell.

And the land hasn’t always been in rice. Originally parts of that territory were used to raise wheat, and Cecil said other crops are being tried out there now, including walnuts.

But in addition to being a key part of Butte County’s economy, rice is a very important habitat, according to Devine. “It supports a ton of species.”

That’s why the plan — assuming full build-out of the general plans — would require easements for nearly 38,000 acres of rice, 31.6 percent of the more than 120,000 acres currently planted in the crop, according to a table in the plan.
Mitigation of growth’s impacts, as required by the federal government, amounts for about 3,200 acres of that. The rest is to guarantee species survival, an additional requirement imposed by the state.

Devine stresses that easements would only be purchased from “willing sellers,” who under current estimates would get $5,000 an acre in rice country.

But would $5,000 an acre draw enough willing sellers? Cecil is concerned because if the plan is approved there’s no going back. “They’re going to have to carry out the plan,” she said. If the acreage goals aren’t met, “they have to do it somehow.”

EXCEPT FOR AG …

Similar conservation plans are currently under development in seven other counties in Northern California, and in place in three more. The reason is that so many different factions like them.

State and federal resource agencies can pretty much ignore places where the plans are in place and direct their resources elsewhere. The plans provide improved, more coordinated environmental protection so environmentalists like them as well.

Developers like them too because they streamline the approval process. And they could have an economic development benefit for that reason — someone pursuing a project is more likely to go somewhere with the more certain outcome the plans provide.

That’s another reason the Farm Bureau’s Cecil is wary of the plan: Ag’s outnumbered. “We’ve been at the table representing ag since the beginning, and we’re the only one.”

The only other complaints come from the firms that have sprung up to guide others through the current Byzantine environmental permitting process.

BCAG Executive Director Jon Clark said he’s heard some concerns that the plan will put them out of business, but he says that’s not the case. BCAG really isn’t set up to purchase easements and do the tasks the plan requires. It would need to hire consultants to do that — most likely the firms that are doing it for others now.

He thinks BCAG may hire one or two more people, but the majority of the work would be done by private firms.

To Clark, the big advantage is local control. Rather than having to deal with the rash of state and federal agencies, all the decisions would be made locally.

And even if the plan weren’t approved, the things it covers are already having to be done and will still have to be done.

“It’s not changing what happens, it just changes how,” Clark said.

“It’s going to save everybody money, save everybody time, and everybody’s going to know exactly what’s going to happen.”

Reach Steve Schoonover at 896-7750, sschoonover@chicoer.com, or on Twitter@ER_s schoonover.