THE MODESTO BEE

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California Lawmakers Take on Agriculture and Farmworker Safety in 2025-26 Session

How could they affect the Central Valley?



Image from Central Valley Farmers Withstand Legislation, Litigation, and Regulatory Pressure

Agriculture plays a major role in the Central Valley, supporting local jobs, businesses and communities throughout the region, but the industry continues to face growing challenges.

California state senators have kicked off this senate session addressing agricultural water efficiency, rural agricultural resilience, farmworker resources and protections, and the challenges facing rural agricultural communities. Together, the proposals raise questions about how California can support agricultural production while protecting the workers who are vital in sustaining it and prepare rural communities for environmental risks.

For the Central Valley, where agriculture is an important part of local economies and communities, these bills raise questions about how the state can truly balance the needs of agricultural businesses with proper concern for the well-being of farmworkers and communities they serve.

The following will examine the proposed legislation and consider what it could mean for the Central Valley.

By Modesto Bee Reporter, **Blanca Avila**

Agriculture and Farmworker Protections

SB-8 – Agricultural Water Efficiency Grant Act
[Introduced by Senator Jerry McNerney, District 5]



Water plays a major role in California agriculture, and farmers need reliable ways to manage it throughout the growing season. However, upgrading irrigation systems and installing new technology can be expensive. Sen. Jerry McNerney's SB-8 would provide $10 million in state funding to help California farms invest in equipment designed to use water more efficiently.

The proposed Agricultural Water Efficiency grant Act would allow farms, ranches, and other agricultural operations to receive financial assistance for water-saving efforts. Eligible improvements would include drip irrigation systems, soil-moisture monitors, water-flow meters, pump upgrades and low–pressure irrigation systems. These tools can help farmers have much better control and the amounts of water they are utilizing and identify where improvements may be needed.

Under the bill, the California Department of Food and Agriculture would oversee the grant program and set rules for applications, eligibility and reporting. Projects expected to save significant amounts of water would receive priority. The state could also give preference to small and medium-sized farms that may have a harder time covering the costs for these expensive upgrades. Farms that receive funding would have to report on their completed projects and provide information about their expected or measured water savings. The department would also make a summary of grant awards and results which would be available to the public.

For the Central Valley, where agriculture is closely tied to everyday life, helping farms improve water efficiency could be especially important. However, the cost of upgrading equipment could be a challenge for smaller farms with limited money to invest. The bill;s focus on financial assistance could help some of those farms make the improvements that they would have otherwise put off.

Still, questions remain about how much the proposed funding could truly accomplish. The $10 million would come from the state's General Fund, and the bill does not guarantee that every farm applying for assistance would receive it. The state would have to decide which projects to fund and how to measure their results. It would also be very important to see whether the equipment leads to the water savings that these farms are expecting.

SB-8 offers a way to support California agriculture by helping farms pay for water-saving improvements. Whether the program makes a meaningful difference would be dependent on how the funding is distributed and its efficiency.

SB-28 — Farmworker Resource Centers Act
[Introduced by Melissa Hurtado, District 16]

- Workplace-rights education and connections to health, housing, and other services

To say farmworkers play an important role in our California agriculture would be an understatement. Despite their important role, it can be difficult to find reliable information about workplace rights, healthcare and other essential services. Sen. Melissa Hurtado's SB-28 would establish farmworker resource centers in rural areas with significant agricultural activity, connecting workers with information and support closer to where they live and work.

Under the proposal, the state labor department would work with local organizations to establish the centers. They would provide information about workplace rights, job safety, workers' compensation and wage laws. The center would also connect farmworkers with healthcare services, mental health resources, food assistance and safe and affordable housing support. Additional services could include Spanish-language resources and English classes offered at little or no cost.

The bill heavily relies on partnerships with local organizations, educational institutions and healthcare providers to help make possible the delivery of these services. It does not call for new state funding, meaning the department and its partners would need to carry out the program without a new funding allocation under the proposal. The state would oversee the centers and publish annual reports on their services, the number of people reached and feedback from workers.

For the Central Valley, where agricultural work supports many local communities these centers could absolutely facilitate access to these important resources. Workers who are unfamiliar with their legal rights or unsure where to seek help could have a local place to find information and referrals. However, the effectiveness of the centers would be contingent on the services they provide and their outreach.

Yes, local organizations may be able to contribute existing services and resources, but establishing and maintaining centers would still require staff, space, and proper coordination. In addition, the state would need to ensure they are reaching those workers who face barriers to accessing assistance. So for farmworkers in the Central Valley, having a nearby place to get informed about their rights or any additional help would be immensely beneficial. But without additional state funding, it remains unclear how many centers could open and how much support they might be able to provide.

SB-45 — Central Coast Ag-Tech & Coastal Resilience Infrastructure Act
[Introduced by Senator John Laird, District 17]



Technology is changing how farms grow, process and transport food. However, adopting new equipment and improving agricultural infrastructure can be expensive. Sen. John Laird's SB-45 would create a state grant and tax program to encourage investment in agricultural technology and other infrastructure projects, particularly in California's Central Coast Region.

The bill would establish a program through the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz), working with the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Eligible projects could include AI (artificial intelligence) and robotics for crop management and harvesting, technology that improves water conservation, more energy-efficient systems for storing and transporting food, and improvements in the food packaging process. In addition to this, it would also support coastal and marine monitoring systems.

SB-45 would encourage partnerships between businesses and regional educational institutions to provide technical training. It would also allow expedited permitting for certified pilot projects, potentially helping new technologies move forward more quickly. The bill proposes $15 million in General Fund funding to support the program.

Although the bill focuses on the Central Coast, its approach could offer lessons for agricultural communities elsewhere in California, including the Central Valley. Investments in such advancements and technologies could benefit many farms and agricultural businesses facing rising costs.

Questions also remain about how the state would divide funding between grants and tax credits, which projects would qualify, what are those parameters, and just how much support businesses would receive. While the proposal encourages innovation, its impact would lie on the practical improvements it is providing for agricultural operations.

SB-45 encourages agricultural innovation, but ultimately the program’s design would determine which businesses relieve support and whether its approach can offer broader lessons for all of California agriculture.

SB-66 — Rural Agricultural and Environmental Resilience Program

[Introduced by Senator Marie Alvarado-Gil, District 4]

Water shortages, wildfires and power outages can create serious challenges for farms and communities that depend on them. Sen. Marie Alvarado-Gil’s SB-66 would create a new grant program to help agricultural operations prepare for these risks while also supporting environmental conservation.

The bill would establish the Rural Agricultural Resilience Grant program under the California Department of Food and Agriculture. This proposal would fund projects to address many different issue areas, and funding would be available to farms and ranches, agricultural businesses, irrigation districts, conservation groups and local governments, among other eligible applicants. The program would allow for partnerships between different organizations, which could help projects that benefit more than one farm or the surrounding community. Applicants would compete for grants, but they would not be required to provide matching funds to qualify.

SB-66 proposes $20 million over four fiscal years, and of that amount $18 million would go toward competitive grants, while the remaining $2 million would support the internal operations of the program. Individual grants would generally be limited to $1 million. The state would consider the risks each project addresses, the true benefits, and whether the project works alongside existing programs.

For the Central Valley, the proposal could support projects that address more than one single challenge at a time. For example, a project might improve water efficiency while also preparing a farm for drought or power outages. Since agricultural operations and rural communities can face several risks at once, combining these efforts could help make investments more useful beyond a single property.

However, creating yet another grant program raises questions and concerns about how funding would be shared and whether smaller farms could actually compete with larger organizations. The bill

calls for coordination with existing state programs to avoid paying for the same project twice, but the existing state program would depend on how applications are reviewed and which projects are receiving the funding.

SB-66 would help farms and rural communities prepare for a variety of challenges through one grant program. How well that approach works will depend on whether the grants reach projects that provide clear, lasting benefits.

SB-82 — Farmworker Heat Safety and Small Farm Support Act

[Introduced by Senator Ana Caballero, District 14]

California's summer heat can make agricultural work dangerous, especially for farmworkers who spend long hours outdoors. Sen. Anna Caballero's SB-82 would strengthen workplace heat protections by setting requirements for rest breaks, access to cooling areas and training. The bill would also provide financial assistance to help smaller farms meet these requirements.

Under the proposal, employers would have to follow heat-safety rules based on the heat index, which accounts for both temperature and humidity. When the heat index reaches 90 degrees Fahrenheit, workers would receive a paid 10-minute cool-down break each hour in the shade. At 100 degrees, the required break would increase to 15 minutes each hour at the cooling station. If the heat index reaches 108 degrees, outdoor work would be prohibited between noon and 5 pm, with a limited exception for work needed to prevent perishable crops from being lost.

The bill would also require annual paid heat-safety training in a language workers understand and prohibit retaliation against workers who raise concerns. Cal/Osha would enforce the requirements, with penalties of up to $1,000 per affected worker for each day of a violation.



To help smaller agricultural operations comply, SB-82 would create a grant program for farms with 25 or fewer peak-season workers that meet the bill's eligibility requirements. Grants of up to $50,000 could help pay for shade structures, cooling equipment, drinking systems, heat monitors and training materials. The bill proposes $15 million in state funding, with a priority for farms in the San Joaquin Valley and other areas facing extreme heat.

For the Central Valley, where farmworkers can spend hours of the day working outdoors during the hottest months of the year, the proposed protections could have a direct impact on daily working conditions. More frequent breaks and access to cooling stations would give workers additional opportunities to recover from the heat. With the proposed grants set to help smaller farms clever some of the costs of meeting the new requirements.

While the bill includes limited exceptions for preventing crop losses, employers would still need to plan for additional breaks, cooling access, and worker training. Raising questions about how the rules would be put into practice, particularly when extreme heat coincides with time-sensitive harvests.

Sb-82 would mean adjusting to stricter heat-safety rules while being considerate to keep harvests on schedule. The proposed grants could help smaller farms adjust to these changes, but employers would still need to find ways to protect their workers when summer temperatures climb.

These six bills show the different ways California lawmakers are approaching the challenges facing agriculture in the Golden State. From water use and farm resilience to worker safety and access to

resources, agriculture plays a major role in local communities. For the Central Valley, the true question comes down to how these proposals would translate into meaningful changes for our farms and workers.

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