

Program Needed to Protect Citrus Land

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer



One of my great professional honors was being appointed by President Obama to help lead the Farm Service Agency (FSA) during his second term. FSA is an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture that runs programs in four policy areas: price support, disaster relief, farm loans and conservation. These programs are outlined in the federal farm bill, last authorized in 2018.

I have been reflecting on those years and how FSA compensates farmers, especially the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Initially created to reduce “sod busting” in the Great Plains of the Midwest, farmers are paid a yearly rental payment for keeping environmentally sensitive land out of production and planting species that will improve environmental health and quality. Contracts are for 10 to 15 years in length and have the long-term goal of improving water quality, preventing soil erosion and reducing loss of wildlife habitat.

Think now of citrus groves and where they are located. Citrus trees do not like wet feet, so they are on dry land, including sand hills, which are critically important for water filtration and aquifer recharge. What are these lands also good for? Development, and we are losing tens of thousands of acres of ag land — especially groves — every year as it converts to housing and other uses that create non-pervious surfaces. Many grove owners don’t want to sell, but HLB has put them in a box, and they see no other way out.

Rightfully, government goes to great length to protect wetlands because they are critical habitats for flora and fauna. They also filter water, but in the aggregate, I suspect that more water filtration and aquifer recharge take place on uplands than wetlands. So, when ag lands, especially those on sand hills, convert to other uses, we lose not just the agriculture but water filtration and aquifer recharge functions, something equally threatening to our state’s long-term wellbeing.

Where am I going with this? The farm bill runs in five-year increments and is up for renewal in 2023. What if the CRP portion of the statute was tweaked to allow payments to farmers who own high-quality water filtration and aquifer recharge land in exchange for agreeing not to sell for a negotiated period? FSA knows how to administer programs such as this, and many citrus growers are already enrolled with FSA for other programs. Amending the CRP program to include lands that provide aquifer recharge could provide just enough support for growers to hold onto their land and get back into citrus when economic conditions improve.

Therapies are on the way that will help citrus production, but many growers are out of time. Let us find a way to help them keep their land and replant when we have HLB behind us once and for all. Not only will we have saved the land from development, but we will have preserved critical water filtration and aquifer recharge in the process.

