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Final edition 50 cents

Statewide group seeks to boost farms' clout Agriculture shortchanged politically, bureau says.

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

Touting a poll showing that 46 percent of California's likely voters believe state government does too little to protect the state's nearly \$30 billion agribusiness sector, a statewide farm group is hardening its political and fundraising strategy to promote a new business agenda.

This week, the 87,000-member California Farm Bureau Federation told state lawmakers many farmers "openly question whether California can maintain its agricultural heritage" in the face of taxes, fees and workers' compensation costs they say are the nation's second highest after West Virginia.

The industry group, claiming that its economic base shrinks by 100,000 acres yearly under pressures of urban growth and that regulatory costs are double those of other Western states, said it plans to issue "legislative scorecards" like other Capitol interest groups and raise up to \$1 million a year for state political campaigns.

Last year, the farm bureau's political action committee raised \$427,335.

"When you get pushed in individual situations at work or at home, you tend to take it for a while," said Bill Pauli, a Mendocino County grape grower, winery owner and farm bureau president.

"We're finally to the point of 'we've had it.' That's why you see us drawing some lines in the sand."

Business analysts find no surprise in the new strategy.

"I think the ag sector, at least vote-wise, is a small percentage," said agribusiness consultant William Mott of Larkspur-based Agland Investment Services. "It's always struggling to have a voice, and I think this is probably a reaction to trying to have a stronger voice."

Though California's 77,000 farms and ranches sold \$27.8 billion in farm products in 2003, those in the industry feel increasingly stressed by rising government permit fees, state regulatory paperwork and some of the nation's toughest environmental rules, Pauli said.

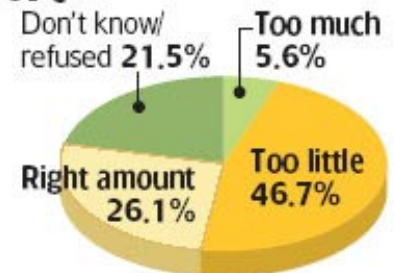
Changing things won't be easy.

A 2004 poll of 2,500 residents and likely voters by the Public Policy Institute of California reported 54 percent of likely voters favored the environment over economic growth as a top public policy.

The farm bureau survey of 900 likely voters by New York-based

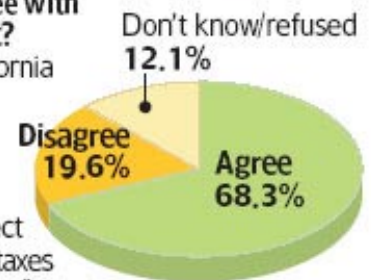
Sowing support

Would you say that state government is doing **too much, too little** or just about the **right amount** to help protect family farmers and ranchers here in California?



Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

"In order to provide California consumers safe and affordable food from their grocery store, the governor and state Legislature should protect family farmers from high taxes and excessive regulations."



Note: The telephone survey of 900 likely voters in California was conducted May 4-5 and May 8-9 in English and Spanish. It has a margin of error of 3.3 percentage points. Due to rounding figures may not add up to 100 percent.

Source: McLaughlin & Associates of Blauvelt, N.Y.

Sacramento Bee/Sharon Okada

McLaughlin & Associates found 46.7 percent believe the state is doing too little to protect family farmers and ranchers.

About 26 percent said the state is doing the right amount, and 21 percent didn't know.

Of those surveyed, 68 percent said the governor and Legislature should protect farmers from "high taxes and excessive regulations."

More than 86 percent surveyed also agreed family farmers make a major contribution to California's economy and job base.

"To voters as a whole, they understand the importance it has in being part of the economic engine in California," said Stuart Polk, vice president of the polling firm.

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