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Poll shows that Californians want more policy support for farmers

By Matthew Bunk

FAIRFIELD - Whether living in San Diego or San Mateo, and regardless of political views, Californians agree that farmers are an important part of the state's economy and need more support from government policy makers, according to research by the California Farm Bureau Federation.

A statewide survey shows that voters overwhelmingly recognize the importance of family farms and ranches. Most people agreed that farmers don't get enough protection from high taxes and excessive regulation.

Releasing the survey results was a way to show that voters support the needs of farmers as interest groups such as the California Farm Bureau Federation push for policy changes that would help the industry.

"It's encouraging to know that Californians stand behind the family farmers and ranchers," California Farm Bureau Federation President Bill Pauli said. "We will harness that support as we work with the governor and the Legislature . . . to protect the farming way of life."

In Solano County, agriculture is a big part of the economy, generating more than \$214 million in sales and taking up 60 percent of the land area. Nursery stock, cattle and calves and tomatoes were the biggest moneymakers in 2003, according to the most recent county crops report.

Agriculture means more to the local economy than production values. Including employment, spin-off industries and all other related manufacturing, agriculture was a \$1.3 billion industry in 2003, according to county agriculture officials.

"It's really important to educate lawmakers and the general public about the needs of farmers," Solano County Agriculture Commissioner Susan Cohen said. "It's not done enough."

Many Solano County farmers signed land-use agreements to keep producing agriculture products in exchange for lower property taxes. Farmers in other jurisdictions have agreed to similar restrictions, many of them out of necessity.

"It's expensive to live here and expensive to farm here," Farm Bureau Federation spokesman Dave Kranz said. "It's important that we don't let family farms get overburdened by state regulations and taxes."

California's agriculture sector is the largest in the nation, with annual gross sales of more than \$25 billion. But it remains a small part of the state's \$1.4 trillion economy.

Agriculture advocates such as the Farm Bureau Federation are moving to have a louder voice in policy

decisions, Kranz said.

Along those lines, the survey results were distributed recently to state lawmakers. Later this year, the group will compile a legislative scorecard to show how lawmakers voted on agriculture issues.

The political effort is called Protecting California Family Farms, and it's the most aggressive political program to date, the Farm Bureau Federation said in a press release.

"Our goal is to make sure farmers here can remain competitive. Part of that effort is that we've gotten much more involved in state and national policy making," he said.

To view the California Farm Bureau Federation's 10-point plan of policy objectives for this year, go to www.cfbf.com/familyfarms.

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Agriculture survey

1. 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?

Too much - 5.6 percent

Too little - 46.7 percent

Right amount - 26.1 percent

Don't know - 21.5 percent

2. Do you agree or disagree that 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?

Agree - 68.3 percent

Disagree - 19.6 percent

Don't Know - 12.1 percent

3. Do you agree or disagree that family farmers are a major contributor to California's economy and job base?

Agree - 86.1 percent

Disagree - 6.5 percent

Don't Know - 7.5 percent

Source: California Farm Bureau Federation