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RCD hopes to join in city's climate plan

Agency helps county with climate goals

By August Howell
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The San Mateo Resource Conservation District has made inroads into a countywide climate action plan and hopes to do the same for the city of Half Moon Bay.

The RCD is a nonregulatory district that provides technical assistance to landowners in managing natural resources. The agency is working with San Mateo County on its Community Climate Action Plan to create a blueprint for the unincorporated areas to reduce their carbon footprint and help the county reach climate goals.

California has ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030 and zero emissions by 2045. Through collaboration with the RCD, San Mateo County's effort outlines a plan to sequester nearly 24,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide in the county each year by 2045. That's about 62,000 cars on the road each year or 708 million miles driven, RCD Executive Director Kellyx Nelson said.

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One of the key aspects of this plan is carbon farming, the practice of absorbing the gas into soil and vegetation. Many climate experts say this benefits farms and ranches while meeting greenhouse gas reduction goals. In a way, Nelson said, it can act as one potential solution to climate change.

“We’re not just talking about reducing emissions,” Nelson said. “We’re talking about reversing climate change.”

As far as the techniques go, Nelson said some look so commonplace you’d never suspect anything unusual. This could include riparian restoration, managed grazing, “cover crops” to slow erosion, fire fuel load reduction and increased composting. In addition to the sequestration, this also helps landscapes with better biodiversity and improved increased water capacity in soils.

So far, RCD has finalized 14 plans in San Mateo County for nearly 7,500 acres capable of taking in 2,000 tons of carbon dioxide annually. That’s the equivalent of removing more than 400 cars on the road, Nelson said.

Adria Arko, RCD senior program manager for Climate and Agriculture, noted that there aren’t a lot of financial resources available to help farmers and ranchers meet climate goals. Her role in developing the county’s plan helped identify potential funding sources and get farms onboard with realistic projects. Last year, Arko was given Greenbelt Alliance’s Hidden Hero Award for implementing these kinds of practices into San Mateo County’s Community Climate Action Plan.

“It’s not regulatory, it’s about how we support people who are interested in adopting these practices and creating an environment that reduces as many barriers as possible,” Arko said.

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Because some carbon farming measures are site-specific, Nelson said the RCD wants to partner with Half Moon Bay as it’s in the midst of developing its own Climate Action and Adaptation Plan. The city has revived new greenhouse gas emissions data from 2019, which it will use to detail methane leakage from buildings and upgrade the methodology for tracking transportation hotspots within Half Moon Bay, the city’s

Sustainability Analyst Veronika Vostinak said. The action portion is expected to be available for public review in the summer before its adoption in the fall. On the Climate Adaptation Element, the city is working on a sea level rise study. It likely won't be adopted until summer 2023.

As part of the deal with the county, RCD provides technical assistance, site reviews and implementation plans to interested parties. Nelson said that the county has allowed farms that partner with RCD to be exempt from getting grading permits on conservation practices.

“When you can find more efficient ways to pump and more efficient energy, it's good for their bottom line as a business at the same time it's a conservation effort,” Nelson said.

Last week's presentation wasn't the first time the City Council has heard from conservation experts this year. In March, the city heard from Melinda MacNaughton, a registered dietitian nutritionist with a master's degree in nutrition science. When asked about reducing emissions of greenhouse operations, Arko said RCD was mainly focused on soil-based work, but there are plenty of opportunities for indoor facilities, such as enhanced irrigation and energy efficiency.

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“We want to support agriculture and keep it going here, and we're worried about it,” Mayor Debbie Ruddock said. “Both from a climate perspective and just losing that use.”

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