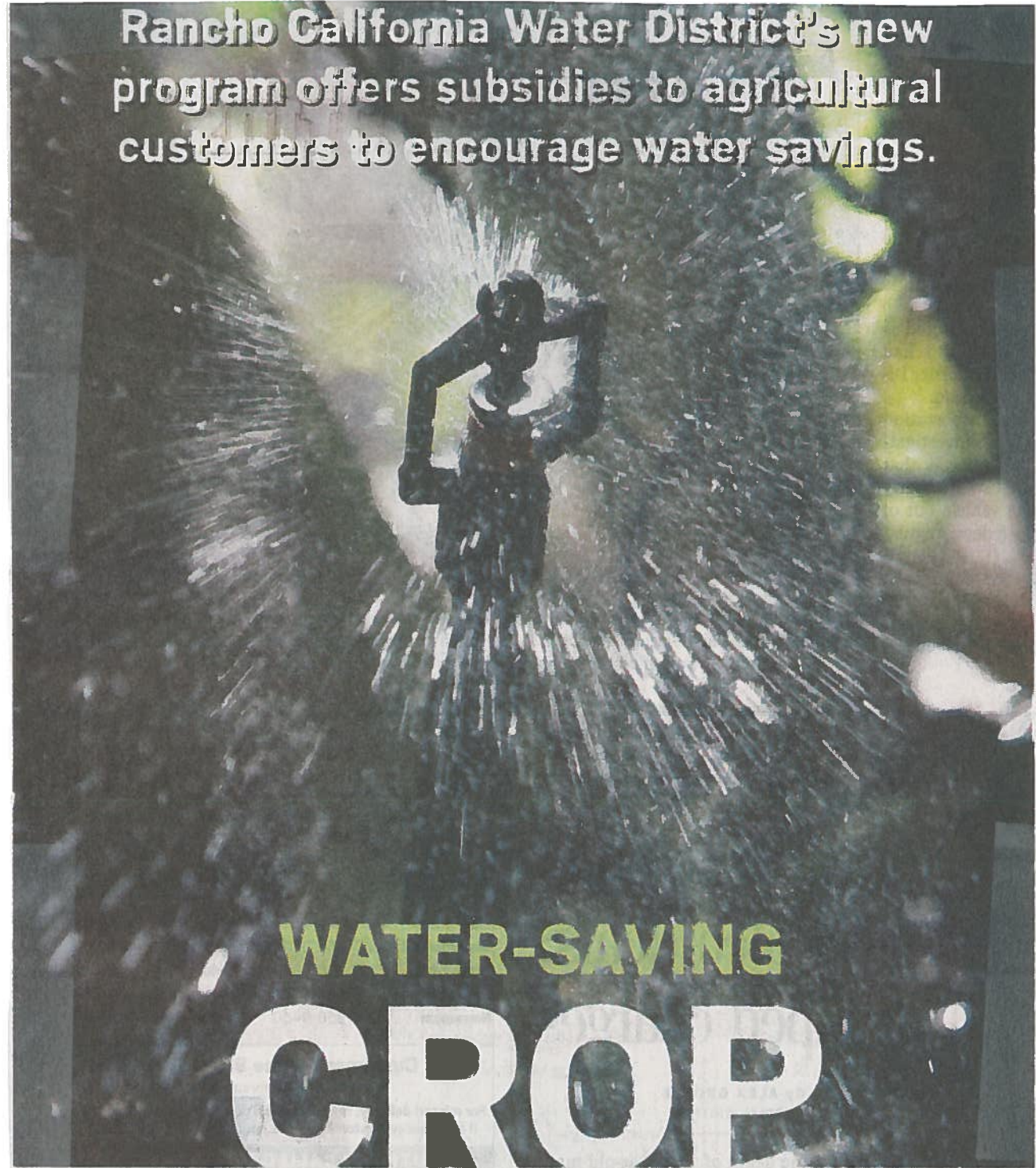


Rancho California Water District's new program offers subsidies to agricultural customers to encourage water savings.



WATER-SAVING

CROP

SWAPS

By AARON CLAVERIE
STAFF WRITER

Thirsty avocado trees in the hills of De Luz are on a literal chopping block.

The Rancho California Water District on Monday started accepting applications from district growers who want to remove high water-use crops, such as avocado trees, for lower-use varieties

such as wine grapes or citrus trees.

In the past few years, those growers have been hit with higher water prices tied to Gov. Jerry Brown's statewide call

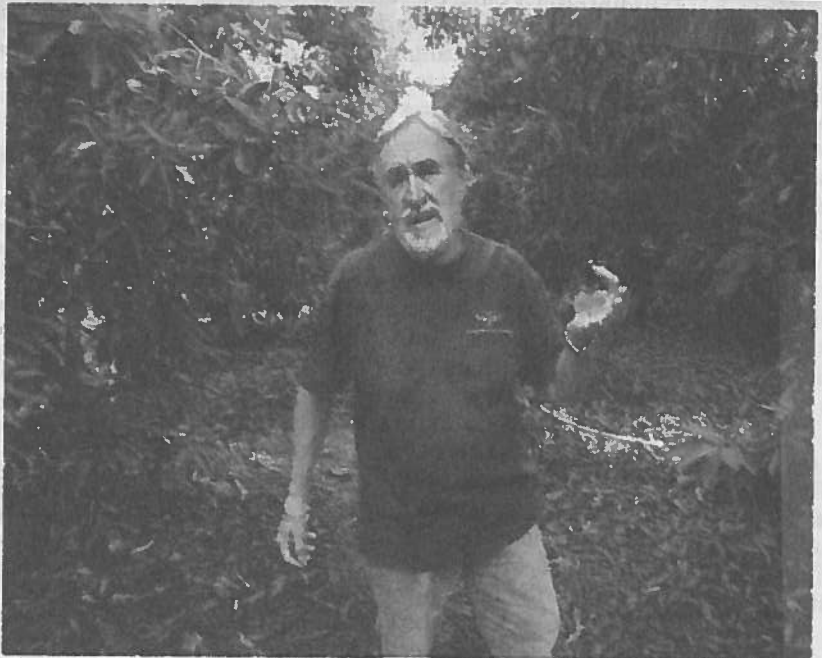
MORE INFO

Additional information about the program, including a complete list of requirements, is available at ranchowater.com/cropswap

for conservation. They also have faced competition from Mexico growers, which is still a pressing concern despite the recent shortage tied to a strike in that country.

"We know some of our customers are struggling right now," said district spokeswoman Meggan Valencia on Tuesday. "Instead of just letting these plants die, this is an option to do some conversion."

The program, which may be unique in



PHOTOS: FRANK BELLINO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Gene Bianchi, owner of Gene Bianchi's Farm in De Luz, talks about the Rancho California Water District's new program to provide grants to farmers who remove water-intensive crops, such as avocados, for less thirsty options.

"We know some of our customers are struggling right now. Instead of just letting these plants die, this is an option to do some conversion."

MEGGAN VALENCIA

RANCHO CALIFORNIA WATER DISTRICT SPOKESWOMAN

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the state, is being funded by \$3 million in grants from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of Water Resources and district resources.

Ben Drake, a local grower who serves on the district's board of directors, said the district has around \$5 million to give out as subsidies, which will be granted on a first-come, first-serve basis to qualifying applicants.

"I've got one client that wants to sign up for the program and another who will be looking at it in April," he said Monday as he was driving to the district office to turn in the paperwork for a client.

Growers who replace avocado trees - which use around 4 acre-feet of water per acre - with wine grapes can get up to \$15,000 per acre.

Those same growers would get a little less if they put in citrus trees, which generally need a bit more water than the 1½ or 2 acre-feet required for grapes.

An acre-foot is the amount of water that would cover an acre of ground to a depth of 1 foot. And it is roughly what two Inland families use in a year.

Drake said the program was designed to save water - about 3,960 acre-feet over a 10-year period - and keep the hills, particularly west of I-15, verdant.

"We don't want you to go out of business," Drake said, talking about the district's message to growers. "We have to maintain pipes and tanks up there ... we

RIVERSIDE COUNTY AVOCADO FARMS (IN PLANTED ACRES)

2005: 8,000 acres

2009: 7,800 acres

2011: 7,000 acres

2013: 6,500 acres

2015: 5,890 acres

Source: California Avocado Commission



A sprinkler used on Gene Bianchi's 10-acre farm.

want you to reduce the amount of water you're using from high-use crops to lower use."

The district expects most of the crop conversions to be avocado to wine grape, citrus to wine grape and avocado to citrus. However, other types of crop conversions that reduce water use will be consi-

dered on a case-by-case basis.

Ken Meiban, the California Avocado Commission's vice president of industry affairs, said the commission is aware of the program, but from what he has gathered, the trees that are targeted for removal are "marginalized groves."

Those types of groves, which could be filled with older trees or trees that have been affected by salty water, produce far less fruit than one that has been optimized for production.

If the program ends up removing those types of groves from the county's total - which stands at around 6,000 planted acres as of last year - the program shouldn't have much of an effect on the state industry, which just wrapped up its third-highest crop value year of all time.

"We're not thrilled about any proposal to lose acreage," he said. "But we're seeing our production level maintained or even increasing."

De Luz residents Gene Bianchi, who has a 10-acre grove with around 1,000 trees, and Tom Caudill, who sold his groves a couple years ago, said Monday they're not sure how many people are going to take the district up on its offer.

People who have good groves and connections with buyers - there are a handful of cooperatives that buy avocados from local growers - may be wary of jumping into another crop, which requires establishing new contacts and employing different growing techniques.

"It's not like they give it to you for free," Caudill said, talking about the grant funding.

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PHOTOS: FRANK BELLINO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Farm owner Gene Bianchi walks through his avocado grove in De Luz on Tuesday. Bianchi has a 10-acre grove with around 1,000 trees.