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Group spreads message about ag Nonprofit visits Fresno on a mission to make Calif. ag sustainable.

By Jeff St. John / The Fresno Bee

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How can California ensure a sustainable agriculture future?

That's the question that the Roots of Change Fund, a nonprofit seeking to raise millions of dollars for community-based projects, asked in Fresno on Wednesday.

In the first of a series of meetings across the state, the San Francisco-based nonprofit met with government, nonprofit and business groups interested in joining its mission to make California agriculture "sustainable" by 2030.

The overall goal is to make the state's vast agricultural output available to its poorest residents, to balance urban growth and the preservation of farmland, and to bring equity to the relationship between farmers and farmworkers, said Henry Holmes, coordinator of Roots of Change's philanthropic programs.

Since 2001, Roots of Change has formed groups at the state and county levels to address issues of agriculture and its links to the economy, the environment and social justice issues, in what Holmes called the group's "first phase" of operations.

"Now comes the hard work," he said. "This second phase is launching an extensive effort to connect people statewide."

Over the next five years, the group hopes to raise \$15 million to \$20 million in grants and from other funding sources to help pay for projects that show the greatest support, he said.

Fresno has plenty of examples of projects that fit in with Roots of Change's mission, Holmes said.

Kaiser Permanente is buying produce from 10 small farmers, including two

in Fresno County, to serve to patients at its 19 Northern California medical centers, for example. Sanger Unified School District buys locally grown produce for its students, and other central San Joaquin Valley school districts are looking into doing so as well.

Another example is Fresno Metro Ministries, which is working with community groups to expand the number of farmers markets and community gardens in low-income neighborhoods.

The Fresno-based nonprofit also is helping farmers markets with equipment and expertise to allow them to accept food stamp payments made through the state's new Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, said Edie Jessup, Fresno Metro Ministries' hunger and nutrition project coordinator.

"We're providing cheap food to the rest of the nation, but it's not coming back to our local communities," said Jessup, citing a recent California Center for Public Health Advocacy study that showed Fresno has a higher proportion of fast food and convenience stores, and a lower proportion of stores selling fresh fruits and vegetables, than almost any other city in the state.

Jessup called the Roots of Change meeting "a great opportunity. It has the potential to bring resources to address things that we've already identified as being the big issues for us."

Holly King, director of agricultural programs for the Modesto-based nonprofit Great Valley Center, a co-sponsor of Wednesday's meeting, said the Roots of Change mandate can be expanded to other areas, such as improved health care or air quality.

"All of those things feed into sustainability," she said. "We're trying to engage agriculture in the discussion, so it created an outcome that is not only beneficial to our society as a whole, but agriculture as well."

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