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THE SENTINEL

VANPOOLS

Vanpool program bags \$3 million grant

Hanford-based agency benefiting from state's fight against global warming



3 HOURS AGO • SETH NIDEVER STAFF REPORTER

When executive director Ron Hughes started a Hanford-based vanpool program more than a decade ago, it was a struggle to locate funding just to get the farmworker and correctional officer vanpool program off the ground.

Not anymore.

With a proven track record and hundreds of vans travelling millions of miles a year

throughout California, CalVans is reaping benefits from California's increasing focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to combat global warming.

Earlier this year, CalVans was awarded \$3 million in cap-and-trade money, to be used in the 2015-16 fiscal year that started July 1.

The cap-and-trade program requires large polluters to pay fines, which are then used to implement greenhouse gas reduction programs.

The \$3 million is enough to purchase 80 vans to add to the 482 the multi-county agency is already operating.

The vans operate like public buses, but with some important differences.

Drivers can take the vans home and keep them at home. A GPS tracking device is installed in every van to make sure it's used for to-and-from work trips only.

The vans require no ongoing subsidy to operate. An average of 11 riders per van pay for the cost of everything except the initial purchase price: Fuel, maintenance and staff time.

The program began as an attempt to improve farmworker van safety. Farmworkers remain the main participants.

They, along with correctional officers, make up about 80 percent of the program's total van use.

Farm jobs involve multiple low-income workers who need to get to a single job site. Many of them aren't licensed, can't afford a reliable vehicle, can't afford to drive on their own or all of the above.

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The cost of an 11-person vanpool is about half what it would be if the group split up into three cars with four people per car, according to Hughes.

The program is now run by a regional authority that covers many of the state's most productive agricultural areas, including the San Joaquin Valley, the Imperial Valley and the Salinas Valley.

Hughes loves to quote the amount of disposable income participants save. In Kings County, he figures the program keeps an additional \$7.2 million in riders' pockets compared to what they would be shelling out if they were all driving their own vehicles to and from the work site.

As an added benefit, the program draws down more federal funding for local transit agencies like Kings County Area Public Transit Agency.

It works like this: Federal money flows to agencies that log the most transit miles. CalVans, technically a government program, logged 1.7 million miles in Kings County in fiscal year 2014-15.

Hughes said that mileage generated \$1.3 million for Kings County's public transportation system. He said the money can be used for operational costs or for buying new buses.

So what about the drought? Is it putting a damper on the agricultural work that CalVans caters to?

Not at all, according to Hughes. In fact, he said it may actually highlight the program's benefits.

Hughes said that growers have become worried about workers potentially leaving the San Joaquin Valley as a result of drought.

He said that many growers are providing vouchers to workers, who use them to cover the costs of riding in a CalVans van.

That way, according to Hughes, farmers build worker loyalty and ensure that those employees stick around — and stick with them.

He estimated that about 50 percent of agricultural workers in the program are receiving vouchers from growers to offset some of the vanpool costs.

But where the program seems to really being coming into its own is the greenhouse gas reduction benefits.

The numbers tell the story.

According to Hughes, in fiscal year 2013-2014, the program saved the state 80.6 million vehicle miles travelled. That equates to a reduction of more than 28,000 tons of greenhouse gases.

The program has experienced constant growth since 2010, meaning the greenhouse gas savings keeps going up too. In fiscal year 2014-15, CalVans saved 93.7 million vehicle miles travelled.

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For state regulators launching an unprecedented effort to reduce emissions that contribute to global warming, those numbers are attractive.

There's a good chance that the program will receive another multi-million dollar year cap-and-trade grant for fiscal year 2016-17 — and the fiscal year after that.

"We'll be applying again," Hughes said.

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