

Gamboni Farms Works with Neighbors to Improve Community Ditches

■ CCID AND NRCS FUNDING PROVIDE FINANCIAL INCENTIVE FOR SILO DITCH AND GAMBONI DITCH IMPROVEMENTS.

John Gamboni is an admitted optimist. The CCID grower, who farms 2,000 acres of row crops, cotton, fresh tomatoes, alfalfa and corn in Dos Palos, says maybe it's his faith in God. Or maybe it's his upbringing. But Gamboni prefers to see the opportunity in adversity.



THIRD GENERATION DOS PALOS GROWER JOHN GAMBONI SAID THE UPSHOT OF THE WATER CRISES IN RECENT YEARS HAS BEEN IMPROVED OPPORTUNITIES TO FUND WATER CONSERVATION PROJECTS TO SAVE WATER AND IMPROVE CONVEYANCE OF DISTRICT WATER TO THE FARM.

"I believe there is always a silver lining in everything, you just have to go look for it."

So when he discusses the challenges farmers face irrigating their crops in an increasingly uncertain water world, the third-generation farmer prefers to focus on the opportunities through programs like CCID's Water

Conservation Program and cooperative grants from the NRCS Bay Delta Initiative to improve irrigation efficiency on farms and in farming communities within the CCID service area.

Gamboni is at the center of two cooperative ditch improvement projects in recent years that have used funding from the CCID Water Conservation Program and additional NRCS funding through the Bay Delta Initiative to concrete-line two earthen ditches to dramatically improve delivery efficiency and conveyance.

Five neighboring farmers who receive water from the Silo Ditch in Spring 2013 completed an \$820,000 large-scale improvement to the community ditch. The ditch improvement project culminated a decade of planning to improve more than 2 miles of earthen ditch into a concrete lined ditch and pipeline. The improvements are estimated to save more than 280 acre-feet of water per year through improved efficiency. Gamboni says they have also drastically improved the speed and efficiency with which his water is delivered to the field.

This year, Gamboni is also near completion on an additional cooperative ditch improvement project on the Gamboni Ditch.

He is also doing his first on-farm conservation project, applying with CCID and NRCS conservation programs to install a drip irrigation system on 100 acres of almonds at Gamboni Farms.

Gamboni said the projects would not have happened without funding, coordination, expertise and guidance from CCID's Water Conservation Coordinator Tracey Rosin and the engineers and maintenance staff at CCID and Merced County NRCS.



WORK ON THE SILO DITCH COMMUNITY DITCH IMPROVEMENT PROJECT INCLUDED REPLACING EARTHEN DITCH WITH MORE THAN TWO MILES OF CONCRETE LINING AND PIPELINE.

"Meeting with them helped pull together the farmers and landowners and explain the mutual benefits of the projects. It's nice to have neighbors to work with who also understand the benefits and are willing to work together," he said. "Jennifer Foster at NRCS in Merced County was so accommodating and made the process easy."

The Silo Ditch improvement straightened out sections of the ditch to speed delivery to the field. Gamboni said it once typically took 12 hours from the time water was turned on at the headgate of the canal for it to reach his farm, resulting in evaporative water loss and a loss of irrigation timing flexibility.

"Now within two hours if it's a dry ditch we are going," he said. The increased responsiveness lets him make better irrigation decisions. "It's a day and night difference."

Installing pipelines also allowed growers to square their fields offering improvements for working the land and added productivity.

But most significant are the water savings.

"Before when we ordered 12 feet off the head we would get 10 feet by the time it reached the field. Now we are receiving exactly what we ordered in 2 hours instead of 12 hours," he said.

Of the total Silo project cost, growers received CCID Water Conservation Program Grants to cover 50 percent of the project cost and NRCS co-funding to cover 35 percent of the cost. John's share of the project was \$282,000. He received \$141,188 through the CCID Water Conservation Program and leveraged an additional

CCID Conservation Program Remains on Track

■ NRCS FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE FOR CCID GROWERS IN POSO SLOUGH DRAINAGE AREA.

CCID's Water Conservation Program remains steady and strong and continues to find additional co-funding opportunities to initiate District level and on-farm conservation projects for its landowners.

The District is working to expedite approvals to allow growers to take advantage of conservation funding opportunities in this particularly challenging year.

The District is staying the course on its 10-year in-District Water Conservation Plan with an emphasis on completing projects that can facilitate the conversion to efficient on-farm irrigation systems. A second priority investment is improvements on community ditch systems to improve delivery efficiency and reduce spills from the system. Third would be the improvement of tail-water return opportunities back to the canal system.

Construction on two regulating reservoirs is scheduled for 2014-15 and CCID General Manager Chris White said the District Board of Directors is committed to following through to get

those projects completed, particularly where co-funding opportunities exist through the Bureau of Reclamation.

"We are still strongly committed to investments that directly help our consumers and make our water supply stretch further," White said. "A major funding mechanism for the Conservation Program in normal years is transfers to neighboring federal districts and refuges. In critical years, we don't have those resources, but our program is planned out such that we should be well funded even with two years of critical year deliveries."

In addition to Bay Delta Initiative funds in recent years to help finance District improvements, CCID this year received an additional \$600,000 in Bay Delta Conservation Initiative funds through the NRCS EQIP program to help co-finance on-farm water conservation installations for its consumers in the Dos Palos reservoir service area. The Bay Delta Initiative has identified the Poso Slough drainage area east of Dos Palos and north of Firebaugh as having high potential to improve conditions in the Bay Delta.



THE PROJECT ALSO STRAIGHTENED SEVERAL MEANDERING SEGMENTS OF THE DITCH TO IMPROVE DELIVERY TIME TO THE FARM.

\$98,000 in NRCS grant funds. His residual \$43,000 cost is covered by a low interest loan through the CCID program.

Gamboni said that while the Silo Ditch project has been in development since 2001, it was the availability of the additional NRCS co-funding that helped make the project a "no-brainer." "And success," he said, "breeds success."

The precedent made getting cooperation from the two farmers and six landowners on the Gamboni Ditch an

easy sell. Construction on the one-mile Gamboni Ditch improvement started in late January and was completed by the middle of March. As with Silo, the concrete lining and pipeline installation on Gamboni Ditch will provide significant water savings and improvements in water conveyance.

"We just irrigated a field and what once took 12 days now takes 8 days, so we save water, we save labor and we save time," he said. "The maintenance to clear out the open ditches has been eliminated with the cement ditch. And with new washout drains, we don't have the

mess in our fields anymore and we gained farm ground in a couple places."

Gamboni said the cleaner water coming in from the cement ditch will also improve the performance of the new drip installation he has planned for this fall on his first foray into almonds.

Water savings alone will return Gamboni's investment within four to five years, he estimates.



GAMBONI HOPES THE PUBLIC WILL STAY FOCUSED IN COMING YEARS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF AGRICULTURAL WATER TO COMMUNITIES LIKE DOS PALOS.



NEW WASHOUT DRAINS HAVE ELIMINATED MESSY WASHOUTS ON THE GAMBONI DITCH AND HELPED CLEAN UP FIELDS.