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Program helps disabled farmers, farmworkers
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By ALI BAY

Capital Press Staff Writer

SACRAMENTO — A serious car accident several years ago left Francisco Ayala in a wheelchair and no longer able to work in the fields as a farmworker. But today Ayala, 32, is able to receive services from a UC-Davis program designed just for him and other farmers and farmworkers challenged with disabilities.

The California AgrAbility Project, part of a national program now offered to California residents, helps farm owners and workers who have disabling injuries manage stress, get access to health care and find rewarding work. Although the California program was launched just a year ago by a researcher at UC-Davis, AgrAbility is already helping Ayala and several other people in the industry.

"What the program did specifically for me was that they gave me a computer so I can do my homework," said Ayala, a Sacramento resident who is attending Sacramento City College. Ayala hopes he can put his computer skills to good

use in a farm office. AgrAbility program leaders also are working on finding water therapy for Ayala, who was disabled in 1997.

"I think the program is really good," Ayala said, adding that he found out about the assistance through a local independent living organization. The former farmworker said he especially hopes that farmers and farmworkers injured on the job can take advantage of the program's services.

22.000 INJURIES

Farm injuries in California aren't uncommon, said Martha Stiles, a UC-Davis researcher who manages the statewide AgrAbility program. "There are about 22,000 injuries in the state each year," she said. "That doesn't mean that they're permanently disabled, but (they've) lost work."

While AgrAbility doesn't have funding to give people money, it is able to assist workers back into jobs, connect them with rehabilitation services, and provide educational opportunities.

"What is important to keep in mind is that there are solutions for dealing with conditions that make it difficult for farmers and workers to continue working," said Stiles. "A solution may consist merely of rearranging a work site, such as moving materials closer, adjusting the height of equipment, or adapting a hand tool so that it is more ergonomically safe for someone with an injury."

Aside from helping Ayala, the program has helped a farmer replace his prosthetic leg with a better-fitting limb to eliminate pain and help him continue farming.

"It's such a neat program," said Stiles. "It has a goal of helping farmers and workers stay in agriculture, whether they have disabilities or not."

The national AgrAbility Project was created to help disabled people working in agriculture. The program links the Cooperative Extension Service at land-grant universities with a private nonprofit disability service organization to help people involved in all aspects of agriculture. The program is administered by the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

ONE OF 22 STATES

California's AgrAbility program is one of 22 in the country. Stiles applied for and was granted funding to launch AgrAbility in California, and she linked the state's program with Easter Seals. Stiles and Easter Seals coordinator Marcie Moreno visit with customers to establish goals that will

help them get back to work on the farm or make their current farm work less arduous.

Stiles tells the story of one farmer who suffers from chronic lower back pain, making it difficult to turn around in the seat of his tractor to monitor his work in the field. "One of my colleagues in another program sent him information on seats they use in motorboats... that twist," she said. "A lot of what (we can do) is adaptive technology. We're going to use all the resources we can on campus. It's so cool."

To date, AgrAbility is available in 13 counties.

"But we don't say no to anybody," Stiles said. "I've gotten calls from Fresno County, Mendocino, Humboldt... we help them any way we can."

To enroll or to get more information about California's AgrAbility program, contact Martha Stiles at (530) 752-2606 or Marcie Moreno at (916) 679-3117. For more information about the national AgrAbility project, visit www.agrabilityproject.org.