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Cal Poly Workshop to Highlight New Methods for Assessing Agricultural Nutrient Levels May 17

SAN LUIS OBISPO – The Cal Poly College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences' Center for Sustainability and the Cal Poly Compost Project will host a special public workshop titled "Understanding & Testing Agricultural Nutrients" Friday, May 17, on campus.

The event is part of the center's ongoing training in nutrient cycling in soils and will be presented in collaboration with the Coastal San Luis and Upper Salinas – Las Tablas RCDs (resource conservation districts).

The workshop will educate farmers, composters, certified crop advisors, extension specialists, land managers, consultants and anyone else interested about how nutrient cycles work in soils and how key agricultural nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) can be measured quickly, effectively and economically to establish best management practices. In particular, training on new technologies such as biological carbon dioxide-burst potential to assess nitrogen availability in soils will be of special value to those needing to manage soil fertility. Measuring the respiration of soil organisms provides valuable information on how nutrients are being used, which is critically important in systematic soil function and in nutrient management planning.

The training comes at a critical time for the California agricultural industry, which is being called upon increasingly to monitor and budget nutrients. The accurate quantification of agricultural inputs to soils will play a fundamental role in safeguarding soil, water and air quality into the future.

The training will feature leading experts in soil testing and management including Bob Miller, soil scientist, professor and coordinator of laboratory proficiency programs. Currently the technical director of the Agricultural Laboratory Proficiency program with Collaborative Testing Services Inc., Miller has more than 25 years of experience coordinating soil analysis proficiency testing programs. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Nebraska. Before earning his doctorates in soil fertility and soil chemistry at Montana State University, he managed a plant nutrition laboratory at Texas A&M University. He served as director of the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources Diagnostic Laboratory at UC Davis and as extension soil specialist from 1988 to 1997. In 1992, he co-founded the Western States Proficiency Testing Program, which pioneered agricultural inter-laboratory collaboration in the Western U.S. In 1997, Miller joined Colorado State University as an affiliate professor in Soils and Crop Sciences, where he was a leader in the development of the North American Proficiency Testing program (NAPT).

Also speaking will be Joe Mullinax, certified plant pathologist and owner of Denele Laboratories in Tulare, Calif., and Emmy Williams, soil scientist and laboratory manager of 20 years at Betteravia Farms in Santa Maria, Calif.

This unique combination of expertise will provide workshop participants with a deep understanding of the state of the art in testing soil and agricultural amendments; how national laboratory proficiency programs (including NAPT and ALP) are seeking to standardize such testing; what industrywide data collection is revealing about nutrient use; and how progressive laboratory recommendations are best interpreted for maximum efficiency in agricultural nutrient utilization. Industry trends and forecasts will be discussed. Local experts will give presentations highlighting regional efforts and testing concerns related to water quality security. Participants are invited to send in their own soil samples for comprehensive pre-workshop soil

health analysis, with in-depth interpretation to be conducted at the event.

“Understanding & Testing Agricultural Nutrients” will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., with registration beginning at 8:15 a.m. Reservations are required. Details can be found online at www.cfs.calpoly.edu/sustainable_ag_lecture_series.html. For more information, call 805-756-5086 or e-mail cfs@calpoly.edu.

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