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Eco-friendly farmers hope to turn profit

Clean water could help distinguish area produce

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PAJARO VALLEY — A group of Pajaro Valley farmers is hoping their clean-water efforts will translate into sales.

Under an effort dubbed the "Monterey Bay Farmers Clean Water Initiative," the farmers are implementing measures, or at least reviewing existing ones, to help make water runoff cleaner.

Call it marketing meets the environment.

Backers hope it will not only mean cleaner water in the valley and in Monterey Bay, but that it also will help distinguish products grown in the area. Participating farms are certified with a label on their products reading "Fields to Oceans, Coastal Farmers Preserving Monterey Bay."

"If you can do these things and drive business, why not?" said Tom AmRhein of A&A Farms and Your Flower Garden near Elkhorn Slough.

AmRhein said he plans to use the labels on his retail products, such as flowers, but not on the items he sells to wholesalers.

His Web site for Your Flower Garden displays the label and explains the program. AmRhein markets his flowers as locally grown, and the label helps reinforce that message.

The measures farmers will implement sound simple enough and vary from site to site. In many cases, farmers already are doing some of the things the program recommends.

For example, farm roads can be sown with grass during the winter and hedgerows can be planted along the edges of fields to prevent water and nutrient runoff. Planting hedgerows along the edges of fields is encouraged for the same purpose. Water and fertilizer use can be monitored to maximize their effect and minimize the overuse of both.

There is a cost factor, though. A device to monitor when irrigation is needed and to monitor nutrients can cost as much as \$1,000.

Farmers, though, can qualify for financial assistance. Stephen Pederson of High Ground Organics said he was able to cover about half of his costs through a program that provides federal matching funds.

Still, that means farmers must come up with the other portion of the cost, as well as take the extra time to implement the steps.

"It does take time and effort," Pederson said.

He said it was a worthwhile effort and has already utilized many of the steps the program encourages. And the assessment portion helped identify more measures he could do.

The hope is the effort will spread to other farms.

"I think it's a very proactive move by farmers," Pederson said. "This is a good way to show farmers are taking proactive steps."

Reggie Knox of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, who is helping coordinate the project, said the program helps bring together environmental and farming concerns. Armed with a \$130,000 state grant for the two-year pilot program, CAFF assembled a team of experts to offer technical assistance to farmers to improve steps they already take and to implement new ones.

"All the conservation experts and the farmers are sitting down at the table together," said Knox. "It's not like some regulator coming out and saying, 'You have to do this.' "

For more information, visit ww.pvpilot.org. Contact Brian Seals at bseals@santa-cruz.com.

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