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Protecting the sanctuary

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By DAVE BROOKS

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

At first it may just seem like broken Spanish, but it's really an attempt to fix the way many growers think about water. Known as the Agriculture Water Quality Alliance, or AWQA (pronounced "aqua"), the group is a coalition of local farmers and conservationists who are taking steps to help preserve the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

Their efforts were celebrated Monday with a ceremony held at Jim Rider's flower ranch in Watsonville. In attendance were Rep. Sam Farr, Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Bill Douros, USDA worker Daniel Mountjoy and California Farm Bureau President Bill Pauli. Joining the men were nearly 40 farmers, who sat on rows of hay bales and listened to the half-hour presentation.

"This type of collaborative approach to managing our land and oceans protects the sanctuary and sustains our region's critical agricultural industry," Farr told the group.

In 2001, conservation management practices were installed on 58,722 acres in the six counties surrounding the Monterey Bay Sanctuary. Extending from San Mateo County all the way down to San Luis Obispo, the sanctuary is home to some of the area's most active marine wildlife, and is surrounded by much of California's most fertile soil. With the land supporting a nearly \$3.5-billion industry that employs 60,000 people working more than 200 different crops, area conservationists face a tough balancing act when determining the best way to protect marine life threatened by nearby agriculture.

Conservationists concluded that the best way to protect the water was to bring the farmers on board. Since January 2000, more than 40 farmers along the Monterey Bay have increased their efforts to protect the sanctuary by taking voluntary actions to prevent runoff.

"This partnership, developed around the sanctuary's agriculture plan, places the agriculture industry in a proactive role as water quality stewards. As farmers and ranchers expand on and adopt new conservation practices, they help protect the long-term health of our waters," explained Katie Siegler, an AWQA coordinator.

Water basins can be harmed by pollutant run-off, often carrying pesticides, that come from nearby farms. While many growers may worry that efforts to protect the ocean may be expensive and complicated, area conservationists argue that the steps are pretty painless.

AWQA has devised three main principles to avoid pollution: keep adequate soil cover, slow down run-off water where possible, and spread water out to prevent it from concentrating. The group suggests simple preventive measures like planting shrubs at the end of fields to catch water runoff, and building earthen berms that divert water from settling in natural channels. The group hopes that by encouraging these practices, they will be able to protect wildlife species in the area. Conservation attempts have already begun to enjoy some success. Since 2000, says AWQA, conservation practices have prevented over 258,875 tons of soil from entering sanctuary waters.