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P.V. farmers ahead of game on erosion

BY TOM RAGAN
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Rebecca Bozarth points to the changes she's made to her strawberry farm to help reduce erosion and minimize runoff from winter rain.

She's installed a network of pipes and holding ponds to capture the rainwater that crosses her farm and ensure that the precious silt and black soil, the recipe for great produce, won't leave her land.

And she's not alone in making sure her farm is environmentally fit.

Nearly 12,000 acres of the total 16,000 irrigated acres in Santa Cruz County are equipped to handle erosion, helping put 75 percent of the 2,500 farmers who operate along the Central Coast in compliance with a 2-year-old state law that aims to curb potentially hazardous runoff from agricultural lands.

The area's rate of compliance puts farmers here way "ahead of the game" compared with farmers elsewhere, says Dawn Mathes, executive director of the Central Coast Agricultural Water Quality Coalition, which tracks compliance.

And local farmers say that's how it should be. It's something they've been doing ever since the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary was created back in the late 1990s, but even before that, they've always tried to be stewards of their land.

"It's just the right thing to do," said Bozarth, whose farm sits just off San Andreas Road west of Highway 1. "Farmers don't want to destroy the ground or their land. When you think about it, what would be the motivation for that? But everybody thinks we're contaminating the world."

The 2003 law, an amendment to the Water Quality Control Act, or Porter-Cologne legislation, is the result of a combination of environmental lawsuits and heightened awareness of agriculture's inevitable impact on water quality due to pesticide use and the fact that it is the largest industry in the state.

"In general, the United States isn't very good at controlling the pesticide and fertilizer pollution from agriculture because unlike an industrial plant, much of that pollution is very widely dispersed," said Peter Gleick, director of the Pacific Institute in Oakland, an independent policy research group that focuses on water and development issues across the country.

When the winter rains come, everybody holds their breath, both environmentalists and farmers, as torrents of water rush through hilly farm land. That water can sweep chunks of soil and any fertilizers and pesticides they carry to the sea — an environmentalist's nightmare.

But make no mistake: The scene is every grower's nightmare, too. Not so much not polluting the ocean—though that's certainly a concern among more conscientious farmers — but the resulting loss of land.

The state law requires farmers across California to take 15 hours of class instruction on how to better manage their farms. Farmers on the Central Coast then must submit a checklist of water safeguard practices to the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board in San Luis Obispo.

By 2007, farmers can be fined as much as \$1,000 if they fail to register with their regional water quality board and if they fail to ensure the water that leaves their farms is eventually tested and monitored.



□ Rebecca Bozarth, owner of Pacifico Azul Farm in Watsonville, shows some silt left on the farm from the winter rains. The rich soil is mixed with the earth around new crops. (Kate Falconer/Sentinel)

Yet what perplexes farmers along the Central Coast is why they have to take classes, fill out more paperwork and pay for water monitoring when it's only natural to take care of the land.

"It's just another layer of government bureaucracy," quipped Steve Bontadelli, one of the largest brussels sprouts growers in the country. "We tend to be stewards of the land to begin with. It's part of farming, and we don't need the government stepping in. We're already spending too much of the day filling out paperwork and not farming. You long for the day to go out and work in the dirt, grow your crop, do your job."

The price of monitoring is based on acreage and runoff, and it's a cost that John E. Eiskamp, a Watsonville raspberry farmer, could do without, too.

He estimates the new regulations will cost him hundreds of dollars annually.

"It's another cost we have to absorb," he said.

Contact Tom Ragan at tragan@santacruzsentinel.com.

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