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AGENCIES BATTLE ELKHORN EROSION

Over the years, slew of silt has washed into slough

By KEVIN HOWE

Herald Staff Writer

Going door-to-door in farm country and announcing, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help you," can be a hard sell.

But a lot of farmers around Elkhorn Slough are buying into a program organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Resource Conservation District of Monterey County to stem a pattern of erosion that historically dumped 48,000 tons of topsoil into the 1,500-acre Elkhorn Slough Reserve annually.

In all, about 80,000 tons of topsoil washed away from the slough's surrounding hills, but more than half of it ended up in the slough.

Picture "a line of pickup trucks filled with sand and stretching from Salinas to the Oregon border," said Cheryl Lambert, project coordinator for the National Resource Conservation Service.

On Thursday, a report on the Elkhorn Slough Watershed Project was released by the two agencies, outlining an 11-year program that has prevented 108,000 tons of soil from eroding on farms surrounding the slough.

The program concluded last year, but education of farmers in both the Elkhorn area and other areas of Monterey County will continue, Lambert said.

"It's ongoing. We're always going to need to do that," but efforts will be spread more widely throughout the county, she said.

Row-crop farming in the Elkhorn Slough area began in the 1970s, said Daniel Mountjoy, who was natural resources conservation project coordinator from 1994 to 2000. Before that, he said, it was rangeland.

"A lot of farmworkers got their toehold in the agricultural industry here," he said, leasing fields to grow strawberries.

The transition from grazing to growing began to generate erosion, and the two conservation agencies began to get involved.

Many of the Elkhorn area farmers were unfamiliar with hillside farming when the project began, Mountjoy said. Many came from Mexico and spoke no English, and a rapid

turnover of farmers in the area meant that when one group became educated about soil conservation, it would move on to more productive land and another generation of farmers would have to be taught.

Several techniques have been adopted, thanks to efforts by the county and federal agencies, said Melanie Bojanowski, watershed coordinator and project manager for the county Resource Conservation District.

These included "grassing" farm roadways and furrows by planting grass in them to hold the soil as water flows through, plowing furrows to follow the hillside contours in the strawberry fields to minimize runoff, contouring and planting stream banks, and other soil conservation techniques.

"We want to improve water quality," Bojanowski said, "while having as little effect on the land as possible."

Farmers are reluctant to dedicate acres of valuable cropland to use for holding ponds, she said, and with the highest turnover of farmers in the state, those working the land are reluctant to make major, long-term investments in what would be a short-term prospect for them.

Conservation officials, Bojanowski said, have approached the absentee landlords of leased fields to convince them that investing in soil conservation will pay long-term dividends to them in the form of higher rents.

The Agriculture Department's Resource Conservation Service began as the Soil Conservation Service in the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s. Preventing erosion is one of its main missions.

Elkhorn Slough "is one of the few estuaries left in the state," said Mark Silberstein, executive director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, which has acquired a three-mile section of land draining into the slough. Some of the land is leased for organic farming, the fields on the steepest hillsides have been taken out of production, and others lie fallow on a rotating basis.

Silt washing into the slough amounted to 185,000 tons during heavy El Niño years, resulting, he said, in both a loss of wetlands and a loss of high-value agricultural land.

"For this to work," he said, "agriculture has to be viable."
Kevin Howe can be reached at 646-4416 or khowe@montereyherald.com.