

Daylight Farms accepts conservation award

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HALF MOON BAY — November is a quiet time for Daylight Farms. Now that the pumpkin harvest is over, farmers John and Eda Muller are preparing to put their fields to bed under a blanket of cover crops.

The cover crops — a medley of legumes, bell beans and wild mustard varieties — are a nod to an old tradition of preserving the soil from erosion and helping prevent water runoff from seeping into neighboring fields.

The common-sense technique is one of several changes the Mullers made five years ago to protect their soil, use less water, and keep their labor costs down.

These include the use of an evenly-distributed "drip" irrigation system in the place of sprinklers, which are less precise and can get blown in the wrong direction. John Muller says the more efficient drip system has helped his farm save 65 percent of its typical water volume and cut down on labor costs.

On Sunday, the Mullers gathered the last of the drip tape from their zucchini patch. Next week, they'll plant cover crops at the site of their pumpkin field on Highway 1.

"The cover crop is very old-fashioned," said Muller. "It is saving the soil from running off in the long term — and it makes us feel that we're doing the right thing on our fields again."

On Wednesday, Daylight Farms will be among the recipients of the first annual Agriculture Water Quality Alliance 2007 Conservation Awards from the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. The awards will honor six California farms based on their "innovation, community leadership, and exceptional strides in farm water quality protection."

Marine sanctuary spokeswoman Lisa Lurie said the awards are an offshoot of a long-standing program the agency has to encourage farmers to adopt management plans that protect water quality.

Without measures like cover crops, harmful levels of phosphorous, nitrogen and other ingredients in fertilizer can leak into the watersheds that surround the marine sanctuary, affecting rivers and the flora and fauna within.

"Sediment can carry persistent pesticides to the coastal zone. It can bury spawning grounds for fish, and it can cover rocky areas for kelp growth," said Lurie.

The Mullers aren't the only San Mateo County farmers using cover crops and other conservation techniques, said Tim Frahm, director of conservation and water quality for the San Mateo County Farm Bureau. But Frahm decided to nominate them for the award because of their community leadership in that area.

"Any time I have an opportunity for a farm to participate in a program, John and Eda step forward," said Frahm, who designed a grant program to help farmers purchase the expensive cover crops in 2004. This year, he will monitor the Mullers' fields to see how effective they are at preventing water and sediment from escaping.

Drip system irrigation is catching on more slowly on county farms than elsewhere in California. Only a handful of local farmers have embraced the technique, which Frahm

attributed to its relative newness.

More and more California farms are switching to drip system irrigation from models such as sprinklers and surface water diversion, according to the Department of Water Resources. In 1972, 0.6 percent of all vineyard crops were planted using drip irrigation; as of 2001, more than 70 percent of vineyards use the technique.

In 2001, the most recent year for which data is available, drip irrigation accounted for 32.9 percent of all crops in California.

The use of drip tape allows farmers to operate their tractors with more precision and even drive over the lines without damaging them, said Dave Kranz, spokesman for the California Farm Bureau.

"Most new planting of permanent crops — orchards and vineyards — are planted using drip irrigation. It's become the standard now," said Kranz.

Last year, Frahm helped lead a drip irrigation study with researchers from the University of California, Davis that compared the growth of two Brussels sprouts fields in southern San Mateo County — one using drip farming, one using conventional sprinklers. The drip system produced a better result.

"They were using a little less water," said Frahm. "There was less labor. There was better management of the fertilizer, and there was more production. There was better poundage of Brussels sprouts per acre.

"It looked like the field was more uniform because of better distribution of water," he added.

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