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Bay lands plan hailed as huge accomplishment

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By DANIEL LOPEZ

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

SALINAS - A summary report of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary's Agriculture and Rural Lands Plan Implementation was released Friday.

The report, titled "Land-Sea Partnerships," highlights the accomplishments made since the plan was adopted in 1999 through voluntary strategies to prevent nonpoint source runoff from rural lands and agricultural operations.

"This project to me is one of the greatest accomplishments in the country," U.S. Rep. Sam Farr (D-Carmel) said as he stood at the edge of a produce field at the Storm Alisal Ranch, where the report was presented.

At the forefront of implementing the plan is the Agricultural Water Quality Alliance. The alliance is formed by members of the agriculture industry, environmental organizations, federal, state and local agencies, technical experts and university researchers.

The coming together of members of the agricultural community and environmentalists to find solutions can serve as a model around the world, Farr said.

"I do believe that we can think globally about these problems and act locally," he said.

Locally, the Central Coast Agricultural Water Quality Coalition has formed 23 watershed working groups to develop watershed protection plans as part of the project.

Eleven of those groups are from Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, including the Elkhorn Slough Watershed Group in Monterey County, the first formed by Spanish speakers.

Within the six counties that drain water into the sanctuary, 400 farmers and ranchers in the watershed groups are formally working to implement plans on their properties to reduce erosion and nutrient runoff, according to the report.

"The problem is having people buy into it in the beginning," said Kirk Schmidt, a Santa Cruz County farmer and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary adviser.

The initial cost of implementing practices can turn some farmers off, but in the end it turns into savings, Schmidt said. This year, he saw no erosion of soil on a property he farms next to Elkhorn Slough after taking preventative measures, he said.

For farmers interested in implementing a plan to prevent runoff, there is assistance, said Daniel Mountjoy, area resource conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"The key with farms is there is no one solution, so what we try to do is develop a plan unique to the land," Mountjoy said.

Last year, \$4 million was committed by 83 agricultural producers toward environmental quality protection plans, he said.

Over the last six years, \$2.9 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been applied toward the project, Farr said.

Through the project, conservation practices have been implemented on more than 157,000 acres of farm and ranch land to protect natural resources and 50,000 acres have been protected from soil erosion, according to the report.

Common conservation practices include planting cover crops, perennial hedgerow planting, grassed farm roads, non-engineered grassed waterways and water/sediment control basins.

In addition, irrigation management practices have been improved on 2,433 acres of land, according to the report.

Some of that land belongs to Gary Higashi, a Salinas lettuce grower.

Higashi said he has cut his irrigation water usage by 25 percent in his drip irrigation system. He has done that with the use of a portable monitoring system and wired meters that measure the moisture content of the soil, allowing him to know when irrigation is needed, he said.

Farr said the success of the program has been based, in part, in the initiative of farmers such as Higashi and Schmidt to voluntarily adopt conservation practices.

Farr said he hopes environmental groups and the fishing industry can reach a similar agreement.

"The problem is the minute you are told you have to do something, you spend every minute of your time fighting it," he said.

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