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WATSONVILLE

Central Coast farmers improve their fields, stop erosion

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Central Coast farmers attended classes and took advantage of federal programs to fortify their fields against erosion in 2005, a measure that helped keep ruinous sediment from flowing into Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

A report released Friday by the Agriculture Water Quality Alliance showed that more than 400 farmers from as far north as Santa Cruz and as far south as San Luis Obispo took 15-hour courses in which they were versed in new erosion-prevention techniques while brushing up on the old ones.

Roughly 50 farmers and ranchers along the Central Coast also invested \$2 million to improve erosion and water quality on their land — part of a matching grant program offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Resources Conservation Service.

In San Mateo County alone, dozens of farmers planted a total 275 acres of cover crops, a practice that keeps the soil stable in the event of heavy rains.

The Central Coast's hills and valleys contribute to a diverse, \$5 billion agricultural industry that includes more than 200 crops, according to the California State Farm Bureau and Federation.

But as the land use intensifies, with development and with farming, the protection of water resources has grown increasingly urgent to protect the Monterey Bay, officials say.

"It's vulnerable to pollution, the sanctuary is downhill and downstream to everything we do," said Rachel Saunders, a spokeswoman for the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

"Certainly there are mutual interests in protecting farmland and the ocean, and farmers themselves have come up with a variety of techniques."

Some of the techniques embraced by farmers included planting grass near dirt roads to slow water, setting up rocks to help stop the onslaught of water from overflowing streams — and purchasing digital recorders that measure the moisture in the soil.

Nearly 20 percent of all classes were offered in Spanish — aimed at teaching newly arrived immigrants how to farm the land that they have leased in the Pajaro Valley and near the Elkhorn Slough.

The courses were offered by the University of California Cooperative Extension and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Edward Ortega, a strawberry farmer in the Pajaro Valley for decades, said the classes taught him a lot about what he already knew, but that it was well worth it.

"It's always good to brush up on it," he said.

"Erosion comes from everywhere, and you can't really point to one place in particular some times."

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