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Matt Bissell and Dawn Mathes: Farming and the environment — a delicate balance

Farming is both a business and a way of life, governed by the laws of nature, constrained by economic and political realities. Like the residents of Santa Cruz County, farmers here are a different breed.

Farms in Santa Cruz County are small; the average size is 60 acres. Much farmland borders wildlife habitat, including sloughs, rivers and streams. Accordingly, farmers in the county have adapted with nature; many have incorporated native plants and habit into their farming operations. Doing so, however, is a risky and delicate balancing act.

A truly sustainable farm balances environmental stewardship with economic viability. These two components of sustainability — environmental and economic sustainability — are essential and mutually dependent. A farmer must steward the natural resources on the farm in such a way that those resources continue to yield a crop. But, the farmer must also earn enough revenue from year to year to support the costs of running the farming business. If both environmental and economic resources are not intact, the farm is not sustainable.

One of the greatest environmental challenges county farmers face is the protection of water quality. Agriculture has taken a proactive approach when it comes to water quality on the Central Coast. They have teamed up with the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary to implement farming practices that protect water quality. In comparison, residential users of septic systems, which contribute nitrogen and phosphorus, have not implemented a program to improve water quality. Most recently, the partnership between farmers and the sanctuary was honored with the governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award — the most prestigious environmental award in California.

When we walk, bike or drive through the Pajaro Valley, we see the work that farmers are doing to protect water quality. Grasses are planted throughout our agricultural drainage ditches. These grasses act to stabilize the banks, as well as prevent sediment and nutrients from entering into waterways. Native plant hedge rows are planted along borders of farm fields, incorporating wildlife into daily farming operations. There is also environmental protection on the farm that the casual passerby can't see. Farmers are incorporating the latest university crop research on both irrigation and nutrient efficiency to reduce water and fertilizer inputs.

But environmental stewardship is not without risk. Perhaps the greatest risk is the ability of a farmer to sell the crop. Because food here is grown for the fresh market, important "food safety" rules apply to ensure the crop is suitable for the dinner table. Strict food safety rules are in place to ensure our produce is clean and free from contamination; however, these rules are often in direct conflict with environmental protection. Most notably, if an auditor finds that a farm has too much vegetation or habitat, the produce on the fields will not make it to the market. While native vegetation on the farm provides important environmental and water-quality benefits, such practices also incur a substantial economic risk. Farming and the environment is a tenuous balance, indeed.

Recent polling has shown that the public supports local farmers. All farmers, organic and conventional, face the same challenges of incorporating environmental protection into the business of production; a delicate balance, but farmers are always up to the challenge.

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