

Locals improve water quality, one farm at a time

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Chris Goodson is on a mission to improve water quality in the Monterey Bay watershed, and he is enlisting growers to make it happen.

As water quality coordinator for Santa Cruz County and the Elkhorn Slough for the Central Coast Agricultural Water Quality Coalition, Goodson offers local growers free help in adding grassed ditches and hedgerows and planting cover crops in bare fields over the winter months.

The aim of the Central Coast Agricultural Water Quality Coalition, a nonprofit started by local farm bureaus, is to make improving water quality an economically viable option for farmers, according to Executive Director Dawn Mathes.

“I think growers are really interested in doing good for the environment,” said Goodson, a Santa Cruz resident. “They want to be good stewards for the land.”

Virgilio “Hilo” Yopez took the cover crop concept and ran with it. At Dutra Farms, where Yopez is general manager, he plants cover crop mixes including cayuse oats, bell beans, dundale peas, common vetch and purple vetch. He has added more each year since he began the practice 15 years ago, planting 225 acres of cover crops in Santa Cruz County and another 50 acres in Monterey County last year.

In fact, when Yopez, a native of Guanajuato, Mexico, starts talking about the benefits of cover crops, he can hardly stop. In one 30-acre field, he points out the increased nitrogen he gets from bell beans and the carbon he gains from oats. In August, after quickly disking under his cover crops, he will plant raspberries in the nutrient-rich soil.

Yopez used to worry about soil quality and water penetration issues, but adding cover crops has improved the situation, he said.

“For us, it costs a lot,” he said. “But chemicals, soil amendments are about the same price. I never tried to figure it out, but this is a more natural way. With the chemicals, you can do a lot of damage to the plant.”

The cover crops help hold down soil in heavy rains and improve soil quality because many plants host nitrogen-fixing bacteria, Goodson said. When cover crops are disked under, plants continue to rot in the fields, thereby creating rich soil that does not need chemical additives. Water also drains into the fields better in the next season, Goodson said.

At a potentially challenging site at Dutra Farms, where hooped rows of blackberries run down a hillside toward Kelly Lake, Yopez has added grassed roadways to eliminate runoff and planted bushy native grasses on the border of the lake.

“This is what we like to see,” Goodson said, extending his arm to cover Yopez’s property. “He’s like our poster boy.”

As he left the field, Yopez excitedly pointed out cover crops he planted between rows of raspberries. That measure earned the respect of raspberry growers touring the property, who couldn’t believe Yopez did not need chemical fertilizers, Goodson said.

Helping farmers grow cover crops is not Goodson’s only mission. Goodson, 30, who earned a bachelor’s degree in environmental sciences and a master’s degree in soil and water sciences, is concerned with minimizing erosion and reducing the amount of fertilizer used by farmers. He helps growers with erosion control projects and the implementation and monitoring of vegetated drainage water treatment systems. He also offers short courses on improving water quality.

A new project for Goodson is the mobile lab, sponsored by the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, which

provides expert services to farmers, such as testing the efficiency of water pumps and irrigation systems. The program is just starting and Goodson hopes to sign up more farmers for the free service.

Water quality improvement efforts appear to be making headway. According to a September report from the Agricultural Water Quality Alliance, 430 Central Coast farmers participated in 15-hour courses in 2005 on preventing erosion. The report said farmers are using winter cover crops on more than 1,000 acres and 13,000 feet of hedgerows were planted in 2005.

According to Mathes, the free advice and growing materials offered to farmers over the past few years has led many to install water quality improvement techniques on their own.

“It’s been incredible,” she said.

For more information, visit www.awqa.org or call Goodson at 227-5404.

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