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Dan Haifley, Our Ocean Backyard: Maintaining green fields and a blue ocean

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In his 27 years as Monterey County's Agricultural Commissioner, Dick Nutter earned widespread respect for his work in support of a major industry. To this day he continues as an environmental volunteer, including service on the Board of Directors of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

So it's only natural that he was one of many who supported an enduring partnership between water quality advocates and farmers in Central California to maintain green fields and a blue ocean.

Agriculture is an \$11 billion California industry that feeds people through the strategic use of land, technology, chemicals, labor and water. Much of the coast between Santa Barbara and San Francisco is under agricultural production, sometimes yards away from sensitive nearshore ocean habitats.

The partnership is between Central Coast farmers and environmentalists to improve the quality of water that flows from farms to the sea. It's a success story you probably haven't heard about -- there are no headline-grabbing fights, just thoughtful problem solving between

partners.

A few weeks ago those partners got a boost when the United States Department of Agriculture announced that the "Central Coast Irrigation and Nutrient Management Initiative" will receive up to \$5.8 million dollars over four years -- \$1.8 million this year alone -- to assist area farmers with water quality projects.

The local grant is one of only 63 funded nationwide from the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program. It will assist farmers in conserving surface and ground water and improve its quality as it flows to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the Morro Bay National Estuary.

Paul Michel, superintendent of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, said "the selection of this partnership for funding reflects the strength and value of collaboration within the agriculture community on the Central Coast."

Farmers who do business in the Pajaro River, Salinas River, Santa Maria River and Coastal San Luis watersheds are eligible for assistance. The USDA says the funds will go directly to eligible farmers for conservation planning, technical design and financial assistance for irrigation and nutrient runoff prevention.

The effort began in earnest in 1999, when farmers and regulators decided to cooperatively address the effects that erosion, nutrient runoff and persistent pesticides could have on ocean waters and the streams and rivers that flow to

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them. The plan was created over the next three years by the six-county Coalition of Central Coast County Farm Bureaus as well as representatives of government and community organizations.

The resulting program obtained a waiver from the requirement for a permit from the regional water quality control board, in exchange for the promise of results measured through the Central Coast Water Quality Preservation Inc.'s monitoring program <http://ccwqp.org/monitoringprgm.html> . The measurements are meant to ensure that the program protects and enhances the quality of water that drains to the ocean while sustaining agriculture.

Directing the plan is the Agriculture Water Quality Alliance, which includes representatives from the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, the Farm Bureaus, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the local Resource Conservation Districts, and UC Cooperative Extension <http://awqa.org> . It's a growing movement. My next column: monitoring water on city streets flowing to the sea.

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