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Article published Jun 9, 2006

Watershed program ends

Program lowers soil erosion at Elkhorn Slough

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ELKHORN SLOUGH - A 12-year campaign to prevent soil erosion in Elkhorn Slough has wrapped up with literally tons of accomplishments.

Since 1994, the Elkhorn Slough Watershed Project has helped prevent the erosion of 107,809 tons of soil a year from the environmentally sensitive area near Moss Landing. That's one of the many successes outlined Thursday as project managers and leaders reviewed their achievements and officially declared the project complete.

The project had the goal of reversing severe erosion caused by crop farming along the watershed's steep slopes through educating and helping farmers learn and adopt more conservative practices.

After a briefing, project managers, coordinators and conservationists toured ranches around the slough at which farmers changed their growing habits to minimize erosion.

The project originally was scheduled to conclude in 2002, but additional grants extended it by four years, said project coordinator Cheryl Lambert, who is with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"It was time to say 'OK, this is the end,'" Lambert said. "We achieved our goals."

Concerning erosion, the project met 160 percent of its objectives, she said.

About \$10 million, from numerous state and federal agencies, was invested into the project.

Before the effort began, 33 tons of soil per acre was being washed from sloped cropland onto county roads and into the watershed, carrying agricultural pesticides and fertilizer residues that degraded water quality and wetland habitat.

Runoff was going into the slough and Moss Landing Harbor.

The problem was costing the county hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, said Mark Silberstein, executive director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

"The design of the project is the restoration of the Elkhorn Slough, which harbors one of the most diverse eco-systems along the coast," Silberstein said.

To solve the erosion problem, project staff members had to convince farmers to stop growing their crops on furrows that ran vertically on the slopes and start working with the contour of the slope to retain soil.

Other goals included improving water quality, solving E. coli concerns in fresh-cut crops and helping manage growth.

About 206 people, about 75 percent of the farmers in the slough, received technical or financial assistance to adopt conservation practices on their land. Lambert said a high turnover rate among farmers made reaching them a challenge. Many, she said, were tenant farmers from Mexico. Conservation practices were implemented on 5,530 acres.

With the project over, Lambert said, the Natural Resources Conservation Service can devote more resources - although a reduced staff - to Monterey County in general.
