

Organic farm tour focuses on mitigating climate change

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WATSONVILLE >> High Ground Organics is perched above Harkins Slough west of Watsonville.

When Stephen and Jeanne Pedersen purchased the 40-acre property 14 years ago, one of their first projects was to plant willows, alders and cottonwoods in a drainage ditch as a way to slow runoff and improve water quality in the slough.

Today, the "pencil-sized cuttings stuck in the mud" are mature trees that have proved their worth.

"It's worked very well," Stephen Pedersen told a delegation of state legislators touring the farm west of Watsonville. "It slows the runoff to the point where the sediments drop out and the water is clear."

High Ground was one of three organic farms visited Thursday during a tour led by California Certified Organic Farmers and the California Climate and Agriculture Network. Participants included state Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, Assemblymember Mark Stone, D-Scotts Valley, and Assemblymember Susan Talamantes Eggman, D-Stockton, chair of the Assembly agriculture committee.

The goal was to show legislators farming practices that can not only help growers cope with severe weather predicted by climate change, but also reduce agriculture's contribution to the problem.

The legislators also visited Pinnacle in San Juan Bautista and Pie Ranch in Pescadero.

"We wanted to connect legislators to the climate benefits of agriculture and to what organic growers are doing to mitigate climate change," said Kelly Damewood, California Certified Organic Farmers policy director. "They're managing now and planning for the future."

The mature trees are just one way the Pedersens have positioned their farm to withstand severe weather, now and in the future.

They also plant cover crops on as much as 80 percent of their land each winter and plow it under before spring planting as a way to build healthy soil that can better hold onto moisture during drought and acts to sequester carbon.

Lisa Lurie, conservation program specialist at the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County, said there's a need for increased research to prove the value of practices showing potential benefits. To protect their investments, farmers must be reassured before they change how they do things.

"Growers need to know the agricultural practices they are going to implement are going to work," she said.

Stone, who noted the increasing importance of organic production in county agriculture, suggested the state's carbon cap and trade program could be tapped to provide funding for organic agriculture.

Monning expressed support for organic production as well, saying even as health conscious consumers drive a thriving organic market, the environment also stands to benefit.

"We have to continue with research and innovation," he said.

