

EcoFarm kicks off 35th year with climate change talk

By Phillip Molnar , Monterey Herald

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Hats on farm tools during a Climate Change and Agriculture seminar during the 35th annual EcoFarm conference on Thursday at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove. (Vern Fisher - Monterey Herald)

Pacific Grove >> At his farm in Guinda in rural Yolo County, Paul Muller said he has adapted to climate change by doing what works.

The drought and weather changes have impacted organic farmers as hard as anyone, making it a major topic at the 35th annual EcoFarm Conference

in Pacific Grove. Muller, co-owner of Full Belly Farm, hears a lot of advice but much of his work comes down to trial and error.

“A lot of time you are doing it by the seat of your pants,” he said at the Asilomar Conference Grounds on Thursday. “Year-to-year, you have a chance to adapt and see if those ideas get you to a healthy outcome.”

EcoFarm, the premier organic and sustainable agriculture gathering in the West, is jam-packed with talks related to lack of water over its four days.

There are sessions on “drought-proofing” your garden, soil fertility, no-till vegetable production, “forgotten practices” to save water, and more.

CSU Monterey Bay associate professor Marc Los Huertos said science is working toward solutions for climate change. Some of his research is looking into nitrous oxide emissions in soil and cover crops’ role in greenhouse gases.

“As a scientist, the good news is we are usually way ahead in theory of ecological ideas that might work in the farm,” he said. “But we have no idea how to apply them.”

Muller said many farmers think of climate change as too big of a problem, but he encourages sharing new ideas and making old models of thinking obsolete.

Muller said his farm combats changes in climate in a lot of ways, including using deep-rooted cover crops, solar panels, more drip irrigation and working soil less while making sure it is rich in organic matter.

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“We’re doing things in our fields now that 10 years ago we never would have done at this time of year,” he said. “... The solution to climate change can be, in fact, looking directly below our feet by sequestering more carbon in our soils.”

However, he said some issues are unavoidable.

“The trends in terms of groundwater stability ... show that there’s a remarkable drop in dependability,” he said. “In fact, we are heading toward a very unsustainable, slow-moving train wreck in the Central Valley.”

Renata Brillinger of the California Climate and Agriculture Network gave a run-down of legislation that could limit the effects of climate change.

Some of it included the passage of the California Global Warming Solutions Act in 2006, which is working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.

Brillinger said programs to reduce greenhouse gases, such as a new plan approved by the Strategic Growth Council to encourage affordable housing near transit and other measures, were under threat.

“The oil lobby is going to come in and try and kill this program with lawsuits that show, maybe not this program but another program, that money didn’t actually succeed in reducing greenhouse gas emissions,” she said.

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