



As a farmer with less than 10 years of experience, Ryan Power qualified as a beginning farmer, allowing him to receive a higher incentive payment for implementing his many conservation projects.



IN CALIFORNIA

NEW ORGANIC FARMERS FIND BUDGETS NOT JUST FOR PEOPLE: WATER AND NUTRIENTS NEED THEM TOO

Six years ago Ryan Power and Adam Davidoff were launching their dream of starting a small organic farm in Sebastopol, California. At the same time Ryan's daughter was coming into the world and so Adam christened their enterprise: New Family Farm. "We were starting a new family," says Ryan explaining the double entendre, "but it was also a new kind of family farm."

At the root of what made their farm innovative, they believed, was an ethic to work with nature as much as possible in a way that could be sustained environmentally and, hopefully, economically.

Managing Water

"We are thankful for the creek we have," says Ryan. "We are thankful for the water in the creek, in the soil, from the air. It is a blessing. It is fundamental to our lives. We don't want to take more than we need."

To turn that concept into on-farm reality New Family Farm uses many tools: A flow meter measures the water going onto the field, delivered by drip hoses

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Farm Facts

Farm Name: New Family Farm

Type: Organic Melons, Squash, Tomatoes and Lettuce

Acres: 15

NRCS Programs: Technical assistance and Environmental Quality Incentives Program

USDA Programs: Technical Assistance and Environmental Quality Incentives Program

Conservation Practices: Irrigation water management, nutrient budgeting, composting, cover cropping and rotation

Conservation Benefits: Improved irrigation efficiency, aquatic species protection, reduced erosion and improved soil health, improved water quality



and buried gypsum blocks in the field give readings of soil moisture, letting them know how moist the soil is 2 and 4 inches deep.

As a result, New Family Farm can use every drop from the creek efficiently—applying only when soil moisture drops to a critical point for plant development.

As Ryan walks briskly along the field edges pointing out the equipment, he simultaneously points out the diverse notes of birdsong surrounding the biodiverse farm: “Wren, house finch, thrush, And When you are surrounded by this all day long,” he says sweeping his arm across the landscape, “you get to know all their songs.”

Feeding the Plants

Water isn't the only thing to get measured regularly at New Family Farm. The melons, squash, tomatoes, lettuce and other crops grown in rotation at the farm are hungry for nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients. As an organic farm, New Family doesn't use conventional inorganic fertilizers. Instead they rely on healthy soil built from compost, cover crops and rotation to deliver the needed nutrients. And to do this without under or overfeeding the crops, New Family Farm has developed a Nutrient Budget. Just as in managing water this means knowing what nutrients are already available in the soil and knowing what is available in the compost they apply and carefully determining how much should be applied and when.

“NRCS helped us do projects we already wanted to do, and helped us make them more successful, which is great.”

- Ryan Power, landowner

NRCS

If all this measuring and recording of water and nutrients sounds complicated, it is. To help with this budgeting and other conservation practices, Ryan turned to the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Agency has professional agronomists, soil scientists, engineers, biologists and more on staff to help farmers with over 100 practices that offer practical ways to protect natural resources while farming profitably.

NRCS offers both technical and financial help. On New Family Farm NRCS helped pay for the equipment and analyses that make water and nutrient budgeting possible. The funding comes from the Farm Bill in a program called



Ryan pumps just the water he needs. He balances his use based on the sensors and flow meters he has installed with the help of NRCS.

the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

New Family and NRCS have also worked together on plans for crop rotation and cover crops that help build the health of the soil, break disease cycles, prevent soil erosion and more.

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Using EQIP, farmers like Ryan can also get funding to complete important projects like irrigation water management, nutrient budgeting, composting, cover cropping, rotation and more. On the average conservation practice, NRCS assumes about half of the cost but for beginning farmers (those farming 10 years or less) like Ryan, the cost share is higher.

NRCS is available to both organic and conventional farmers at 55 offices California. The assistance is free and voluntary. To find the office nearest you go to www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov.

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