

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE



Stephen Pedersen points out the numerous well-adapted species represented in High Ground's mature hedgerow.



IN CALIFORNIA

TAKING THE HIGH GROUND AND FARMING WITH NATURE

Perched on a hilltop sloping down to Harkin Slough, High Ground Organics Farm in Watsonville, California, has a unique ability to affect surrounding wildlife and water quality. And owners Jeanne Byrne and Stephen Pedersen work hard to make those effects beneficial ones.

Nesting Bald Eagles and Other Birds Call it Home

Today there are many winged witnesses to Jeanne and Stephen's success: white pelicans, owls, osprey and, recently, bald eagles patrol the slough below the farm. "These are the first nesting bald eagles seen here in over 50 years," Jeanne says. According to Audubon bald eagles may be seen on the coast during the winter but nesting pairs like those near High Ground Organic Farm are a rare and cherished sight. Overall, some 250 species of birds have been counted on the farm.

How do they juggle this top-notch environmental stewardship with running a profitable farm? "Carefully," Stephen laughs. "For us farming organically isn't just about not using toxic chemicals. It's an ethic — of working with the natural environment, not against it. Farming shouldn't mean doing combat with nature."

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Farm Name: High Ground Organic Farm
Type: Organic Leafy Greens, other Vegetables and Strawberries
Acres: 17
NRCS Programs: Technical assistance and Environmental Quality Incentives Program
Conservation Projects: Filter Strip, Hedgerow, Cover Crops, Critical Area Planting, Riparian Buffer, Irrigation Efficiency, Rotational Grazing, Erosion Control, Crop Rotation
Conservation Benefits: Improved irrigation efficiency, wildlife habitat, pollinator and beneficial insect habitat, natural pest control, reduced erosion and improved soil health, improved water quality, wind buffering



High Ground Organics rotates more than 30 crops — numerous species of leafy greens, other vegetables and strawberries — across 17 acres of their property to be sold at farmers markets and to members of their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). The cropland sits atop a hill with four paddocks of native grassland downslope between the crops and the slough. The grassland is rotationally grazed by goats, as a management practice, to control non-native species and improve opportunities for habitat.

From Gully to Habitat

Before they even purchased the farm, Jeanne and Stephen walked the property with NRCS and initiated plans to establish a vegetative buffer — called a filter strip — between the farm and the slough, to slow down and filter any runoff. “It was one of their first projects on the farm to ‘work with the natural environment,’ but far from their last,” says Rich Casale, the local District Conservationist with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. Casale and the local Santa Cruz Resource Conservation District (RCD) have worked with Jeanne and Stephen since 1999. In that time, they have partnered on more than a dozen conservation projects (see side bar).

“We want to leave the land better than we found it.”

- Jeanne Byrne, landowner

That early project area concentrated on an eroded ditch that had carved a gully across the farm, threatening to carry valuable top soil to the slough. Instead, in a project called Critical Area Planting, Casale recommended species well suited to the low-lying area that could fill in the eroded area and trap sediment while creating habitat for birds and wildlife.

Early Hedgerow Adopters

Today hedgerows are gaining increased popularity for their many benefits to farms, but High Ground Organics installed one of the early hedgerows in California. Designed by Sam Earnshaw, with Community Alliance for Family Farms (CAFF) at the time, and funded by NRCS, the mature 15-year old strip of flowering bushes and perennials has provided pollination, natural insect control, erosion control, wildlife food and habitat and a buffer against wind for over a decade. “So many insects visit them,” Stephen says as he gestures to the variety of plants: ceanothus, elderberry, dogwood, coffee berry, coyote brush and more.



Berries are one of the farm’s most important crops.

“We only irrigated the hedgerow for the first couple of years,” he says, “and it continues to provide pollination and pest control year after year.”

Early Partnership with NRCS and RCD Really Helped

Stephen says that working with NRCS and the RCD was particularly valuable in the farm’s early years. “The property needed a lot of work back then. The partnership helped us take on many projects we didn’t have the cash or expertise to do... the irrigation system, the hedgerow, the riparian buffer, and erosion control.”

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to both organic and conventional farmers, with 55 field offices in California (www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov).

Legacy

High Ground Organics Farm is also protected with two easements — one to enhance the slough’s water quality and habitat, and one that stipulates the land will be farmed organically. It’s a rare type of easement, but one that made it tenable for Stephen and Jeanne to purchase the farm in the area’s sky-high real estate environment.

As to their legacy, Jeanne says simply: “We want to leave the land better than we found it.” Then she adds with a twinkle in her eye: “Of course we never intend to leave it.”

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