



# FARMERS THRIVE DURING DROUGHT

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Even as desperately needed rain continues to drench California, Central Valley farmers are still reeling from having their water supplies drastically reduced when the drought intensified last spring. Many farmers have been forced to rip out crops that can no longer be irrigated. Some have doubled or tripled their groundwater pumping as wells dry up before their eyes.

In the Monterey Bay area, however, crops reach toward the sun with thirstquenched leaves. Well levels aren't raising any alarms, and the threat of losing water supplies has mostly subsided.

"I don't know anybody having water issues right now," said Joe Schirmer, owner of Dirty Girl Produce, a 40-acre organic farm in Watsonville.

Motivated by a need to keep seawater from seeping into the region's aquifers, Monterey Bay water agencies and both small farms and large corporate farms

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Tom Broz, who established Live Earth Farm as a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in 1995, says, "We maintain a high level of organic matter in our soil because it holds more moisture."

PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

## CONSEQUENCES OF EXTREME DROUGHT.

Although the Monterey Bay area's climate allows for growing pretty much everything under the sun, farmers are initiating conservation from the ground up by growing drought-tolerant varieties.

Unlike in the Central Valley, almond orchards that require heavy watering aren't popping up in the Monterey Bay area. Instead, many farmers focus on crops like Brussels sprouts and cauliflower with relatively low water needs.

Broz, who sits on the board of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, typically leaves some areas of his 60-acre farm fallow because they aren't productive enough to justify irrigating. And he says he prefers to sow cover crops — plants such as buckwheat or clover that are left to cover soil instead of being harvested — to support his farm's ecosystem. Similarly, farmers often take acreage out of commission during drier months to focus their watering efforts on plots that are better suited to the weather.

Despite the sustained efforts of local farmers and water managers, keeping the level of water basins at a healthy level remains a daunting task.

Few of the region's wells have gone dry in recent years. But as the effects of climate change continue to grow, the uncertainties associated with farming grow as well. Extreme heat, reduced rainfall and wildfires all promise to become permanent features across the Golden State.

Most local farmers, however, seem optimistic. They say they'd like to reverse — and not just stop — the overdrafting of aquifers. And water management experts such as Haddad say the farmers of the Central Coast are well-suited to persevere through constant innovation.

Broz says as farmers adapt, they need to support each other and not allow a divide to form.

"Farmers are almost like an endangered species," Broz said. "It's important that we don't pit one type of farmer against another. We need to look at the system as a whole and work together toward something we can aim for."

