UCSC Farm awarded $665,000 USDA grant

By Bonnie Horgos - Santa Cruz Sentinel
Posted: 08/21/2012 04:07:35 PM PDT
Updated: 09/21/2012 04:32:45 PM PDT

SANTA CRUZ - A $665,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture grant will help teach organic farming techniques to a new generation of farmers enrolled in UC Santa Cruz’s Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems apprenticeship program, among other things.

Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, visited the UCSC Farm on Tuesday to announce the grant, which also will help pay for partnerships with other sustainable agricultural organizations and a revision and expansion of farmer training manuals.

The center’s apprenticeship program, which lasts six months, teaches young farmers about sustainable and organic agriculture through hands-on learning on the university’s 25-acre farm. About 1,400 students have graduated since its founding in 1967.

"I’m very happy about this grant," Farr said. "It’s exciting when the USDA is able to give grants as big as this one."

The grant also will allow the Ecological Farming Association, the Community Alliance with Family Farmers and the California Certified Organic Farmers to collaborate on the apprenticeship project. The four partners will work with new farmers - those within their first 10 years of business - to develop a Beginning Farmer Network in Santa Cruz, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Monterey and San Benito counties.

About 20 people gathered on the UCSC Farm to hear Farr’s official announcement, celebrate the grant and snack on organic apples from the farm.

"This program is incredibly important, and it’s academic," Farr said as he lifted a hefty binder containing the program’s information. "I mean, look at this thing here. It isn’t a simple pamphlet."

UCSC has tried to lead by example with its own farming practices, university spokesman Guy Lansier said. The farm also hosts a farmers market at the base of campus garden tours and community outreach events.

"Santa Cruz is sort of the leader of this kind of hands-on agriculture," Lansier said.

Farr, who co-chairs the House Organic Caucus and is the ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee’s subcommittee on agriculture, has supported the UCSC Farm since the early 1980s. Farr said in addition to helping create healthy, organic food, he hopes the grant will lead to job opportunities for the apprentices.

Agriculture contributes $4 billion annually to the Central Coast economy, he noted.

"The capital of agriculture is here on the Central Coast," Farr said. "It’s in our economic interest that we build a new generation of farmers."

UCSC Chancellor George Blum师范 said the farm remains an important area of the campus.

"The farm has been a tradition at every session and it is still a part of our education," Blum师范 said.

In addition to learning on the farm, apprentices have gone on to teach sustainable and organic agriculture overseas, Blum师范 said. Through this grant, he hopes more people will learn about UCSC’s practices.

"It isn’t just the 1,400 graduates that we’ve produced over the past four decades, but their students as well," Blum师范 said.

Elaine Walker, an apprentice who has worked on the farm since April, said the program has taught her many aspects of sustainable agriculture and introduced her to influential people within the agricultural community.

"It’s a lot of learning, and I get to meet people from all around the country," Walker said.

Follow Sentinel reporter Bonnie Horgos on Twitter @bhorgos