

Conservation practices yield abundance

Study tests no-till sowing and three-crop rotation

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A light touch produced a heavy crop of feed this spring at John Knutson's dairy farm near Oakdale.

He used the no-till method of growing grain — sowing the seed through the previous crop's stubble rather than turning over the soil.

He said the change cut down on dust and on tractor fuel, because he had to make only one pass through the field.

Knutson got something else for his effort — praise from Sustainable Conservation, an environmental group that urges low-impact farming methods.

"It's our basic model to work closely with the dairymen and regulators, as well as to find solutions that work for everyone," said Ladi Asgill, a project manager in the group's new branch office in Modesto.

Sustainable Conservation, based in San Francisco, enlisted Knutson and 11 other California dairy farmers in a study of the no-till method and triple-cropping.

The latter involves growing three rotations of feed crops in each field over a year, instead of the usual two. This increases the crops' use of nitrogen from the dairies' manure, reducing the risk of groundwater pollution, Asgill said.

Andy Zylstra, a dairy farmer west of Turlock, tried triple-cropping with two rotations of corn and one of oats. He said the total feed volume rose about 30 percent, to 50 tons per acre.

The field trials were done with help from the University of California Cooperative Extension.

Today's celebration of the 37th Earth Day gives people around the world a chance to learn about environmental concerns and possible solutions.

Environmental care and a profit

Sustainable Conservation, founded in 1992, stresses cooperation with businesses on solutions that allow them to keep making a profit.

The group works with dairy farmers on extracting methane gas from manure to generate electricity. It urges food processors to create wetlands for wastewater disposal. It works with automobile recyclers



Oakdale-area dairy farmer John Knutson examines an almost-ready crop of triticale, a cattle feed he grew with little soil disturbance in a project with Sustainable Conservation, an environmental group.

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to keep toxic materials out of waterways. It urges nurseries to stop selling invasive plants that can damage habitat.

Sustainable Conservation's new branch office is in the Great Valley Center building on Needham Street.

Asgill, the lone employee there, is an economist and financial consultant whose experience in the Central Valley includes renewable energy, vegetable seeds and food processing. He is a native of Sierra Leone and has lived in the Modesto area for about 10 years.

Out on Knutson's land on Albers Road, one result of the group's partnerships with farmers is a waist-high field of triticale, a wheat-rye cross used to feed dairy cows.

"I hope to find out within the next two weeks how my crop did," Knutson said Wednesday of the pending harvest. "It looks good right now."

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