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Rio del Mar first graders get in touch with premature calf during a field trip to dairy.

Local pupils get a close look at the wonders of farming

By JAMIE MARKS
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APTOS — The heifers were playing and the bull was baying as 28 first graders and kindergarteners from Rio del Mar Elementary School romped around the Monterey Bay Academy dairy Thursday.

The field trip was part of an open house for the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau's Adopt-a-Class program, which was begun last year in an effort to teach area schoolchildren about the wonders of farming.

Twenty-four classes from throughout the county participate in the program, with Rio del Mar school having the largest number of classes signed up, according to Farm Bureau Manager Jess Brown.

At the dairy, Patty Brown's class got to stick their fingers into a baby bull's mouth, pet a premature calf whose eyes haven't yet opened, and watch a sterilized metal tank fill up with milk.

"What are the goldfish doing in here?" asked one inquisitive youngster, pointing to a water tank by an outside pen for expectant cows.

"A lot of people ask that question," replied foreman Ted Gilbert, explaining that the fish keep the tank clean by eating algae that would normally build up along the sides of the tank.

Gilbert said they milk cows 18 hours a day in three shifts at the dairy. Their product is sent to San Jose, where some of it is processed into cheese and the rest is earmarked for milk cartons.

The dairy has about 320 holsteins, which are cared for by the high school students who live on the campus of the Monterey Bay Academy, according to Gilbert.

While Brown's class was learning about the dairy business, other classes at Rio del Mar were hearing about roses, organic farming and even learning songs in Spanish about farming.

Lynn Sakae, of Ocean Front Floral Co., showed slides about her family's commercial wholesale rose operation. Later, she pulled out buckets of multi-colored roses and taught Esther Jessee's third-graders how to de-thorn a rose stem without drawing blood. It wasn't always successful, but the students enjoyed the challenge.

Jessee said the students are learning many aspects of roses, from how they are grown to their importance in the local economy. Later in the year, the students will visit the nursery.

In Adrian Fagalde's second/third grade class, organic farmer Bruce Dau explained how he plants spinach, lettuce, broccoli and cauliflower, emphasizing his points with a colorful slide show.

In another room, Joanne Yablansky had her Spanish students sing a Mexican folk song about planting corn to make tortillas.

Thursday's open house was only part of the Adopt-a-Class program, according to the Farm Bureau's Brown. Throughout the year, the students maintain contact with their farmer by writing letters and paying a visit to their ranches.

Brown said Santa Cruz County was the first Farm Bureau to develop the program, but it's an idea that apparently is gaining in popularity. Several other Farm Bureaus have begun programs this year, and more are expected to start them in the future, he said.

"It's an easy program and there's so much benefit for the kids. The growers enjoy it, too," Brown said.