

Agriculture goes through rough times

But it's still the number one industry in the Pajaro Valley

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Proposed tests of genetic engineering, field planting by machine, and exploration of new export markets were a few of the major developments in agriculture in the area in 1986.

While agriculture remains the region's number one industry, some of the players departed the scene. West Coast Farms, the biggest grower in the Watsonville area, announced Jan. 13 that it was going out of business.

The Resetar family had been active in Pajaro Valley agriculture since the turn of the century, but threw in the towel because the economics of the business had become too burdensome, according to general manager John Bachan.

Much of the land that had been farmed by West Coast Farms is now under management of Bud Antle Inc.

Harden Farms, a major vegetable grower in the Salinas Valley, also closed its operation Jan. 2 because of financial difficulties. It was the fifth Salinas-based company within a few months to announce its closing.

In early January, an Oakland-based company, Advanced Genetic Sciences, approached Monterey County officials with plans to test Frostban, a man-made bacteria that doesn't allow frost to form.

A strawberry patch in North Monterey County was to be the test site, but public outcry in protest expressed at several hearings caused the Board of

Supervisors to carefully scrutinize the experiments.

Monterey County is now developing regulations that would guide such biotechnology testing; meanwhile, AGS has moved to Southern California to find a site.

Another new type of technology was tested by Sakata Ranches. The company contracted with Growers Transplanting Inc. to have a lettuce field planted by a machine rather than by people. The planting techniques bring greater efficiency to planting and allow growth of plants to begin regardless of weather patterns.

The expensive transplanting machine injected more than half-a-million 30-day-old plants into an 18-acre parcel off Riverside Drive. Tom Sakata, owner of the operation, said he tried transplanting in his field because rain had made it impossible for crews to do their work. He said the plants grew to maturity with no problem, but that the timing of their harvest unpredictably coincided with a peak supply of lettuce and in the end yielded him little profit for his effort.

Last year's mild, rainy winter meant growing produce in the Pajaro Valley was less of a challenge for growers than finding a place to sell it. Several seminars offered by government agencies and trade groups attempted to inform farmers of possible markets in foreign countries.

During one such seminar in Salinas in November, the State Trade Commission tried to



When West Coast Farms auctioned off all its equipment, there were plenty of buyers.

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entice farmers into developing products and market campaigns that could be taken on a trade mission to the Pacific Rim.

While segments of the agricultural economy thrived and found rewards with innovation, the value of agricultural production overall dropped in both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties, as judged by the annual crop reports for 1985.

Depressed prices for lettuce, grapes and cattle are blamed for the \$31 million drop, or 3 percent decrease, in the value

of agricultural crops in Monterey County. The county still grossed nearly \$1 billion in overall farm-product sales, with lettuce being the number one crop.

Value of Santa Cruz County's agriculture dropped by 27 percent in 1985, according to figures presented by the county agricultural commissioner in June. Strawberries were number one among the dozens of crops that made up the overall agricultural value of \$114.6 million.

The voice of agricultural

interests became more official as strawberry grower and former Farm Bureau president, Sherry Mehl, was elected to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

Another big step for the area's number one industry was the organization of the Agricultural History Project. The committee of the Pajaro Valley Historical Association is working to tell the stories of the important contributions agriculture has made to the area.

In October, the AHP hosted a successful Threshing Dinner

fundraiser at the fairgrounds. The historical group hopes to have a permanent building within three years, but is temporarily collecting items in a barn on Harkins Slough Road.

Big issues of immigration and toxic pollution from pesticides also consumed the energies of the agricultural community and promise to continue to do so in 1987.

Economy
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REFERENCE

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