

## Pajaro Valley farmer taps water-saving sprinklers

By Donna Jones , Santa Cruz Sentinel

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Javier Zamora uses his new water-saving, rotating, overhead sprinklers to knock the mites and the dust off his organic strawberries at his 18-acre farm in Royal Oaks. (Dan Coyro -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)

ROYAL OAKS >> A light drizzle fell from the sprinklers placed in Javier Zamora's strawberry field Friday morning.

With December's storms behind them and no rain in the National Weather Service forecast for this week, Pajaro Valley's farmers are back to watering.

Last year, as drought gripped California, Zamora's bills for water and the electricity that runs the pump at his well skyrocketed. But this year, he invested in a [new irrigation system](#) that's dramatically cutting his costs and water consumption.

"I want to save money, and as an organic grower, I want to make sure we're not wasting our natural resources," he said.

As a Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency director, Zamora also wants to set an example for other small growers who may think they can't afford to invest in water conservation.

The agency oversees a groundwater basin depleted by pumping in excess of annual recharge. Part of its strategy for eliminating the deficit is to cut average yearly groundwater pumping 9 percent.

"Sure, you're going to spend more money at the beginning, but you're going to save," Zamora said of making the switch to a more efficient irrigation system.

Zamora installed his system, Field Stand by Jain Irrigation, on 2 acres at a cost of about \$2,000. A \$150 to \$200 energy-saving rebate from PG&E will help defray the cost. Zamora thinks the system will break-even this year and reap savings for years to come.

This is the first time he's used it on strawberries, but when he tested it on vegetable crops last summer, he said he cut water and energy consumption 50 percent.

"And my vegetables were really, really good," Zamora said.

Later in the season, Zamora will switch his strawberries to drip irrigation, but overhead watering helps new plants get established. He also uses the sprinklers sometimes during the growing season to wash off pests.

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The aluminum pipe sprinklers commonly used to irrigate pump water at high pressure, resulting in a downpour.

Zamora's system, which consists of plastic tubing and sprinkler heads that constantly rotate 360 degrees, works at about half the pressure and sprays water more gently. As a result, he said, he gets better infiltration into the soil and less runoff.

Larry Hirahara, salesman at Kuida Ag Supply in Salinas, said farmers in Oxnard, where irrigation efficiency mandates are in effect, were among the first to adopt the Field Stand system. It also has been installed on 10 acres in Salinas and another 10 in Moss Landing.

There are drawbacks, Hirahara said. The system is not as portable as aluminum systems, though it's not difficult to move. Because the droplets of water are so fine, wind, which affects all sprinkler systems, could be a problem. Still, he thinks the system will grow in popularity.

"It's not going to immediately replace sprinkler pipe," Hirahara said. "But I think when (growers) begin to understand the lower application rates, less runoff, less pressure, the economics of energy and water conservation will come to bear."

Zamora said as a small farmer, he has to be on the lookout for opportunities, whether for cutting costs or increasing his market. He leases 18 acres on a hillside off Maher Road in North Monterey County, and grows a variety of crops, including four kinds of strawberries. He's harvesting leeks now. In an adjacent field, rows of young green and purple cabbages poke from the plastic that covered last year's tomatoes. He raises cut flowers too, and the drought-tolerant South African protea he planted last year are beginning to bloom.

"For someone like me with a small operation to grow and survive against the bigger companies, you have to be creative," Zamora said.

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