

Stephen Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne

High Ground Organics • Santa Cruz County

As family farmers, Stephen Pedersen and Jeanne Byrne have always believed in taking care of the land.

The couple own and operate High Ground Organics, a 38-acre farm in Watsonville. They grow organic fruits and vegetables sold through a community-supported agriculture program and at local farmers markets.

Half of their land is protected under an agricultural easement, which keeps it in farmland, prohibits development and also requires that it be managed organically forever.

“We both consider this a lifetime project to improve the land and the farm, so that we can pass it on someday,” Byrne said.

In addition to generating fresh, organic crops, Byrne and Pedersen have recognized and welcomed an abundance of wildlife that resides on the farm and in a nearby slough. The farm sits atop Harkins Slough, a vast wetlands area on which many species depend for habitat. In order to protect the sensitive habitat of the slough, the hillsides that lead to it have been placed in a conservation easement, which means they can't be farmed or developed.

“We believe in protecting the biodiversity and consider it a privilege to be able to care for the land here,” Pedersen said. “We wouldn't want to farm any other way.” 🌿

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