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## Ecological farming conference nears

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WATSONVILLE — The growth of artisan cheesemaking, organic wine tasting and how goats can be used as effective land managers are but three of the diverse topics scheduled to be discussed at the Ecological Farming Association's annual conference this year.

The seaside event, one of the largest of its kind on the West Coast, draws hundreds of people to discuss and learn about sustainable farming techniques, marketing, its role in rural communities and how it can be expanded.

This year's event will be Jan. 25-28 at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove on the Central Coast. Registration information: <http://www.eco-farm.org>, or call 1-813-763-2111.

According to Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Santa Cruz-based Organic Farming Research Foundation, the conferences that began in 1990 have focused on central themes that have not changed.

One goal is to "expand opportunities of new and existing farmers to prosper using sustainable systems," Scowcroft said. The sessions also seek to "inspire the public of the value of safe and healthful" food and to "foster an ethic of land stewardship... and humane treatment of animals," he said.

The event also features a bus tour to local farms, although organizers said that the popular, winding trip often sells out early.

The region boasts cool, foggy summers, sunny springs and falls, and mild wet winters, which result in a climate that supports a wide range of crops suited to the climate and fertile coastal soils. Among the crops: strawberries, kiwis, lettuce, blackberries and others.

Organizers said they also this year plan to discuss the pros and cons and do's and don'ts of mixing farming and not-for-profit corporations. Topics will include: partnerships for easements and stewardship, obtaining non-profit status, special accounting requirements, and more.

Among the speakers: Poppy Davis, who works for the USDA Risk Management Agency, teaching farm business skills to small and beginning farmers. Previously she worked as a public accountant serving agriculture, nonprofits and small businesses; and Aimee Crawford is the easement program manager at the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, and was formerly conservation manager for the Sonoma Land Trust.

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