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Farr praises organic center

Congressman views improvements to ag training program

By LESLIE ESCOBAR
The Salinas Californian

Some of Monterey County's small organic farmers mingled with U.S. Rep. Sam Farr on Tuesday as he viewed new additions to the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association's Rural Development Center.

About 20 farmers met with Farr, D-Carmel, during the hour-long tour and question-and-answer session at the center, on Old Stage Road.

ALBA, a 20-year-old nonprofit organization, uses two Monterey County farms to teach farm workers to become entrepreneurs by learning to grow and market their own organic produce.

"We're fortunate to have (ALBA) supported by the federal government and private sector," Farr said after the event. "The better we prepare our work force, the more competitive we can be."

The nonprofit group has received more than \$1 million in grants from the Economic Development Center since 1999. That money has gone toward constructing a classroom, office, cooler and tractor shed.

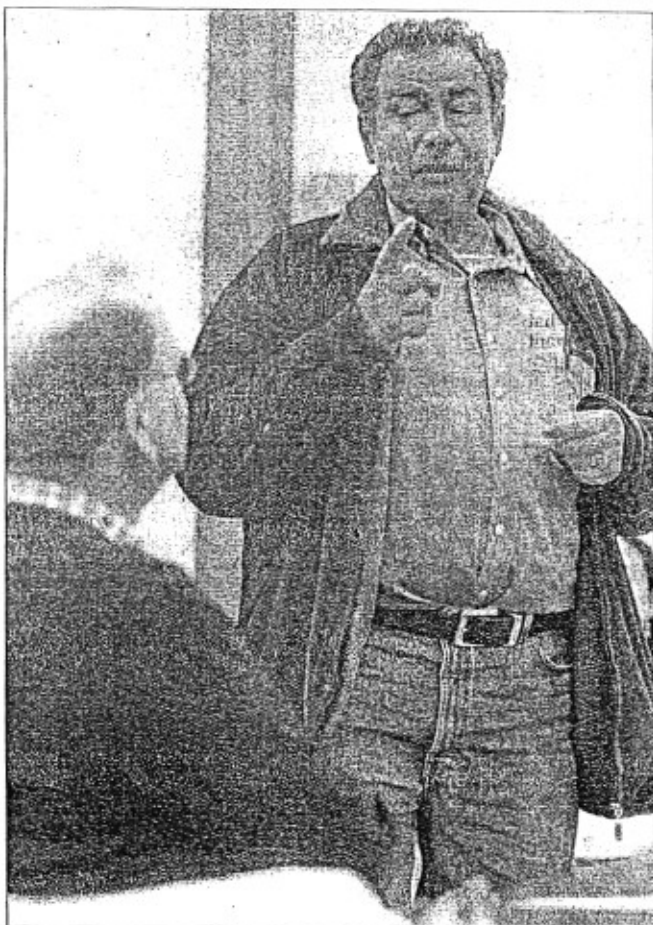
Gary Peterson, ALBA's communications and development director, said about 500 farmers have enrolled in the program since its launch.

The six-month program includes required classes at Hartnell College. Farmers also learn everything from harvesting to marketing the produce while growing about 50 different crops.

After the six months, farmers can lease land through ALBA for up to four years, though they're encouraged to seek out other growing opportunities throughout the Salinas valley.

Peterson said he was happy that ALBA's beginning farmers were able to meet with Farr, who spoke Spanish to the crowd during the event. Farmers praised the successes of the program while also advocating for more like it.

"I think it's important for people to understand a politician like Sam Farr is accessible," Peterson said. "ALBA would like to help people



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Miguel Garcia, right, talks Tuesday to U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, at the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association headquarters on Old Stage Road in Salinas.

understand how to engage with elected officials; ultimately we want people to be an active part of the community."

Peterson said he's also hoping that as more and more organic farmers complete the program, the public will find better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

For now, though, he's enjoying the chance to expose more people to organic farming.

"No matter what happens, people come away with better job skills and a better understanding of local agriculture," Peterson said. "We turn out more educated workers."

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BACKGROUND

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association was officially launched in 2001. In the 15 years before that, the program was known as the Rural Development Center. ALBA teaches beginning farmers everything from how to grow and harvest produce to how to market the products to the public. More than 500 farmers have gone through the program since it was founded.

ALBA is always accepting tax-deductible donations to continue its educational programs. Information: Call 758-1469 or write to ALBA, P.O. Box 6264, Salinas 93912.