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Getting their hands dirty

Students interested in agriculture clamor to get into FARMS Leadership Program

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Jessica Rodriguez is an animal person. She doesn't bat an eye as a newborn calf sucks urgently on her ringed finger as she talks about her career goals.

"I want to be a nurse. Gross things really don't bother me," the Casa Grande High junior said as the calf left her fingers foaming with slobber.

Rodriguez and 30 other Sonoma County high school students participating in a yearlong FARMS Leadership Program spent Tuesday at two west Petaluma dairy operations, examining milking barns, walking fields to see grazing patterns and letting newborn calves suck on their fingers.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Rodriguez said.

The FARMS Leadership Program was started by the nonprofit Center for Land-Based Learning in Winters, and is coordinated locally by the Southern Sonoma County Resource Conservation District.

Keeping the field trips going has been difficult this year, according to participants. "It's all grant funded and it's really getting hard," said Jason Sweeney, watershed coordinator for the conservation district and coordinator of the local program.

FARMS Leadership is marking its 10th anniversary in Sonoma County and becoming increasingly popular among students who may or may not see themselves heading into any aspect of the farming industry.

At Casa Grande High in Petaluma, 20 students applied for six spots. At Windsor



Photos by CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Garry Mahrt talks to a group of high school students during a tour of his organic dairy farm Tuesday.

Oaks Academy, half of the school's 60 students applied for 10 spots. Healdsburg, Sonoma Mountain and Laguna high schools also participate.

"It's grown into a very special program," said Windsor Oaks science and math teacher Susan Nystrom.

"A lot of our students haven't been from one end of the county to another," she said. "The assumption that students are cosmopolitan or well-traveled isn't necessarily the case."

For Mike Griffin, corporate coordinator for Clover Stornetta Farms who coordinated Tuesday's visits to McClelland Dairy and Gillian's Dairy west of Petaluma, the FARMS program is about exposure -- to both farms and the idea of sustainability.

"It's trying to get their imagination going, to get those legs for college life," Griffin said. "You have to excite people about the fact that you can make an impact on your future."

Over the course of the school year, the 30 students will visit seven different agriculture operations from Drakes Bay Oysters to Green String Farm in Petaluma.

In November, students picked enough apples at Laguna High teacher Joe Maloney's ranch to send 10 gallons of frozen juice to all seven FARMS programs statewide.

"This is a phenomenal program," Maloney said. "Sometimes that bulb goes off a little brighter when they grab an udder and say 'This is not a gushy thing.' "

For Casa Grande junior Ryan Gorsiski, the program is helping to prepare him for an upcoming internship at the San Francisco Zoo and hopefully a career in zoology.

"I get hands-on experience and learn about my environment and community," he said.

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