



COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ

701 Ocean Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060-4073
(831)454-2000 | www.santacruzcountyca.gov
Nicole D. Coburn, County Executive Officer

News Release

Date: August 6, 2026

Contact: Jason Hoppin

Jason.Hoppin@santacruzcounty.us



PILOT PROJECT IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY TO EXPLORE STEAM AS ALTERNATIVE TO SOIL FUMIGATION IN BERRY FIELDS

The Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner (CAC) is initiating a \$175,000 pilot project funded by the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) to use steam as an alternative to pre-plant fumigation in berry fields, advancing work to foster the availability and adoption of sustainable pest management in California.

The pilot project, led by the CAC David Sanford, resulted from conversations with community groups interested in exploring fumigant alternatives near certain sensitive, community-serving locations such as schools. As part of the pilot, several berry producers in the Pajaro Valley will test the use of steam in lieu of conventional pre-plant soil fumigation starting in Summer 2026. Research will continue into 2027.

"This pilot represents an important collaboration to meet the needs of communities and growers in California," said DPR Director Karen Morrison. "DPR is pleased to support efforts that encourage local partnerships, drive innovations in alternatives, and advance sustainable pest management."

Steam treatment for pest management involves injecting high temperature steam into the soil before planting. The heat helps reduce certain soil-borne pests, plant diseases, nematodes, and weed seeds. The test fields will be selected for the pilot project based on their proximity to schools or other sensitive sites to explore this potential alternative to help reduce the use of field fumigants near communities.

DPR recently [released findings](#) from an independent study on alternatives to pre-plant fumigants that documented that no existing alternative can currently serve as a direct substitute for chemical fumigants on a wide scale. The study identified the need for more research to understand the soil and climate conditions where alternatives can be effective.

"This project provides an opportunity to further assess soil steaming as a potential alternative to conventional pre-plant soil fumigation," Sanford said. "We're pleased to

SERVING THE COMMUNITY | WORKING FOR THE FUTURE



support this collaborative effort by helping inform the public, facilitating community engagement, and contributing to the evaluation of a promising technology in sustainable pest management."

The Santa Cruz CAC and members of Safe Ag Safe Schools (SASS) brought the project to DPR for funding consideration. The CAC will collaborate with a University of California researcher, industry partners, berry growers and landowners, community members, and adjacent sensitive-site representatives on the pilot.

"The Pajaro Valley has some of the most concentrated use of fumigants in the state, including near schools and homes," said Kathleen Kilpatrick, SASS member and retired school nurse. "SASS members support exploring non-chemical alternatives on fields near schools. We hope these pilot projects will provide tools for pesticide reduction and expansion of organic buffers."

The Santa Cruz CAC will hold community outreach meetings throughout the pilot period where people can ask questions, provide feedback, and offer input. The first community meeting will take place August 18th at 5:30 p.m. in the Greg Caput Community Room of the South County Government Center, 500 Westridge Dr., Watsonville. More information can be found on the Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner's [website](#).