

Drought on minds of farmers, vendors at Tulare's World Ag Expo

By Robert Rodriguez

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California's historic drought took center stage at this year's World Ag Expo in Tulare on Tuesday as farmers searched for solutions to help them maximize what little water they have.

"This is a desperate situation for many farmers," said Mike Hansen, creator of the Ag Flag, a device that lets farmers know when to shut off their irrigation pumps. "What we are trying to do is help farmers stay in business."

Tuesday was the first day of the three-day expo, the largest farm equipment show of its kind in the world. More than 1,400 exhibitors are at the expo, which is expected to draw an estimated 100,000 people over three days.

Gov. Jerry Brown is scheduled to tour the Ag Expo Wednesday morning and discuss state efforts to address the drought. Brown declared a drought state of emergency last month and directed state agencies to take steps to prepare for water shortages.

Hansen's Atwater-based company was among dozens at the annual farm equipment trade show selling water-saving equipment and technology. Devices like Hansen's operate on a simple principle of having a flag pop up when water reaches its destination. Other technology uses soil sensors and wireless technology to provide efficient irrigation.

In today's water-tight world, growers are using every tool in the book -- from analytics to high-priced irrigation equipment.

Washington state corn farmer Bill Fekkes is thinking about plunking down more than \$150,000 for an overhead irrigation system that is designed to provide water directly where it is needed.

"There is no question that this is an expensive investment," said Fekkes, who farms about 1,000 acres of corn silage. "But this is the next step to become more efficient."

Ag Expo chairman Stephen Cunha, a Tulare County pistachio farmer, expected exhibitors with irrigation equipment and technology to get a fair amount of attention. Like many farmers in the Valley, Cunha is dealing with his own water shortages.

"Last year we did not get any water and now we are having to rely more on our wells," Cunha said. "The challenge is that everyone around me is in the same position and the water table is getting lower."

This year at the expo, the number of companies offering web-based irrigation solutions appeared to be growing. With these new tools, farmers can get real-time data on their smartphones or tablets about their water use.

One San Luis Obispo-based company, Hortau, uses soil sensors and wireless technology to tell a farmer how much water a plant or tree needs.

"The days of using a shovel and sticking your finger in the ground are over," said Brennon Christopher of Hortau. "And now in the face of a drought, no one wants to use any more water than they need to."

South Florida citrus farmer Johnny Georges didn't have any wireless technology to sell. In his words, he had a simple solution to a complex problem: a plastic cone he calls the Tree T Pee.

The cone is placed at the base of the tree to prevent irrigation water from seeping outside the plant's root zone. By doing so, a farmer can save water and money, Georges said.

The product's simple design has been well received by Florida citrus farmers. Georges sold more than 127,000 cones last year. The T Pee also garnered the attention of the ABC television show, "Shark Tank." Georges appeared on the show last year, earning an investment of \$150,000 from billionaire businessman John Paul DeJoria, co-founder of the Paul Mitchell line of hair products.

Georges is optimistic the device will do well at the expo. The Tree T Pee sells for \$5.95 each.

"I guess you can say we are well," Georges said. "I just sold 5,000 to an almond farmer a few minutes ago."

47th World Ag Expo

When:

Wednesday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Thursday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Where: International Agri-Center, just east of Highway 99 in Tulare

Cost: \$15 general admission at the gate. Children 12 and younger free

Parking: Free on the expo grounds, but free, off-site parking is encouraged. A Park and Ride shuttle is available

Website: www.worldagexpo.com

More coverage: Go [here](#) for Bob Rodriguez's Sunday preview, including a "by the numbers" chart and a map of the grounds.

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Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/11/3763791/drought-on-minds-of-farmers-vendors.html#storylink=cpy>