

Farmers tackle tough issues at agribusiness management conference

By Robert
Rodriguez

Immigration reform, drought and food safety were among the heavy duty issues discussed at Wednesday's 33rd annual Agribusiness Management Conference in Fresno.

The one-day conference, organized by Fresno State's Center for Agricultural Business, is designed to give farmers, industry leaders and related companies a focused look at some of the most critical issues facing agriculture. More than 400 attended.

For San Joaquin Valley farmers, a shrinking pool of workers has become one of their biggest challenges in recent years and efforts to seek a legislative remedy have been mired in politics.

Attorney Lynnette Jacquez, a principal with CJ Lake, a Washington, D.C.-based law firm, said that because efforts to move an immigration reform bill in Congress have stalled, the White House is expected to take administrative action later this year. Among the more significant actions the president could take is to expand the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a policy granting children of undocumented immigrants a temporary reprieve from deportation.

But Jacquez says there is very little in the proposed action that deals specifically with agriculture workers. Previous immigration reform bills required those seeking legal residency to continue working in farming for a period of time.

"There are no provisions for a future flow or replacement of workers," Jacquez said.

Agriculture leaders and their lobbyists have offered a counter proposal that asks, among other things, to consider a special program for agriculture workers.

Water issues

Another speaker challenged attendees to be water-wise. Valley farmers received little to no surface water this year, forcing many to rely heavily on groundwater pumping to keep their trees and plants alive. The result has been a drastic decline in water levels.

Already the drought has cost the state \$2.2 billion and an estimated loss of 17,000 seasonal and part-time jobs.

"What would it have cost if we didn't have access to groundwater?" said Richard Howitt, professor emeritus from the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California at Davis.

Howitt calls the state's groundwater supply a farmer's insurance policy and he urged the agriculture industry to take control of its management. If the drought continues another year, the proliferation of permanent crops including almonds and pistachios will only accelerate the problem of a declining water table.

To help solve the problem, Howitt urged farmers to look at what Orange County does to manage its groundwater: Users pay for what they pump and if they use over an allotted amount, they have to pay to replenish it.

Howitt said the system is simple and equitable and can ensure continued, but measured, growth of permanent crops. During a question and answering session, at least one farmer said any discussion of managing groundwater must also include talk of how to develop a more reliable plan for supplying surface water to agriculture. In some areas of the west side of the Valley, surface water is preferred because the groundwater can be high in salinity and harmful to

some crops, including almonds.

Meeting food safety challenges

Food safety is another emerging issue. Tougher standards are being implemented not just by government regulators, but retailers, as well.

David Acheson, former chief medical officer of the Food and Drug Administration, said the rules have changed in food processing and companies must have a comprehensive food safety plan, traceability, a consumer complaint system and crisis and recall preparedness plans. He also said it's important to track what's being said about the company and to have a key message to provide consumers in the event of a recall.

Making food safety even tougher to stay on top of are new pathogens and drug-resistant strains of deadly bacteria, said Acheson, who now runs his own consulting company, The Acheson Group.

Scientists have also found that some bacteria such as listeria have survived for months in food processing plants. In one case, the bacteria was found in the floor mats of a food processing plant.

"And it had lived there for 24 months," said Martin Wiedmann, a professor in the Department of Food Science at Cornell University. "We removed the floor mats and we got rid of the listeria."

Wiedmann said the bacteria can be commonly found in nature, especially where there is an abundant source of water. And it can also be moved easily into processing and packing facilities if plant workers are not careful.

Contact Robert Rodriguez: brodriguez@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6327 or [@FresnoBeeBob](https://twitter.com/FresnoBeeBob) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>