

Drought, insects on citrus industry's mind

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(Photo: David Castellon)

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Though the nearly 400 people who attended California's Citrus Mutual's 2014 annual Meeting Thursday night were happy and festive, their conversations often took serious turns.



And the topics often were the same.

"Water. Water. Rain," said Rick Smith, accounting manager and an administrator for Griffith Farms, which grows citrus in the Woodlake and Strathmore areas.

That's no surprise considering California is in its fourth year of drought, and the Valley — the state's primary citrus-growing regions — has been hit the hardest by the lack of rain.

"What are we going to do if we don't get more water? How can we get help from the state and federal officials," Smith said, recounting some of the topics he'd heard discussed by people attending the banquet at the Visalia Convention Center put on by Citrus Mutual, the Exeter-based trade association representing about 2,200 California citrus growers.

"It's very dire. I think the general public doesn't know how dire it is," Deborah Roberts said of the water shortages farmers here are facing.

"We made it through this year, but we did a lot of crop damage" from cutting back on irrigation in some orchards in order to stretch out the water growers had available, added her husband, David, who with his wife grow oranges, lemons and cherries near Seville.

"We hurt our trees," he said, adding that the reduced water could result in them producing less and smaller fruit.

Without a significantly wetter winter than the last and if more San Joaquin Delta water has to be directed away from farms to support fish populations, "next year is when the shit hits the fan," David Roberts said.

Not that water was the only issue weighing on the citrus industry Thursday night.

"We've got a lot of issues this year," said John S. Gless, who grows citrus in Riverside and Kern counties.

Besides water, a big issue in the citrus industry is huanglongbing — or "HLB" — a bacteria capable of killing citrus trees, along with the insects capable of spreading it, Asian citrus psyllids, he said.

It would have been hard not to find anyone in the room who didn't know that remains of two psyllids were found in insect traps last weekend south of Exeter.

While swarms of the insects have been found in Southern California since 2008, efforts by the state and the citrus industry to prevent their migration north into the Valley's citrus-growing belt haven't been fully successful.

More than 40 psyllid finds have occurred in Tulare County alone, along with additional finds in Kern, Fresno and San

Joaquin counties, as well as in the San Jose area.

Though the finds have mostly been small and none of those insects tested positive for HLB, citrus farmers are deeply concerned that more psyllids will make their way into the Valley, and if some are carrying the virus they could devastate the citrus industry here.

“It’s extremely threatening,” said Gless, noting that HLB has spread so far among Florida’s commercial citrus groves that the state has lost more trees than the number in all of California’s groves.

“It’s here, and we have to keep it controlled. We have to spray groves,” to keep the psyllids from colonizing here, he said.

Another big topic of conversation was labor.

“What it is is that we need a ready supply of pickers and harvest crews, and everything’s up in the air,” because efforts among federal lawmakers to produce immigration reform have been stalled, Smith said.

He said farmers generally support some sort of guest labor program that allows farm workers from Mexico to enter the U.S. to work then return home.

“It just keeps getting kicked further down the road” in Washington, D.C., Smith said.

But he said that with Republicans becoming the majority in the U.S. Senate following Tuesday’s election, he hoped immigration reform will get some new momentum.

“I think the Congress would rather handle it rather than [President] Obama making some kind of categorical action and forcing it down their throats,” Smith explained.

Another labor issue concerning the farmers here is Assembly Bill 1897, which Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law in September.

When it takes effect Jan. 1, farmers could have to make up the difference if labor contractor underpay their workers or don’t provide valid workers compensation insurance for them.

James Sherwood, a citrus grower from Madera, said farmers are worried about being strapped with financial liability for the actions of labor-contracting services.

Not that all the discussion Thursday night was gloomy, as issues of water and labor and insects tended to make their way only briefly into conversations where the citrus-industry members seemed more focused to happily catch up with what was going on in each others lives and sharing stories.

“I think people are looking forward to another good year,” said Jim Gordon, who grows citrus in the Ivanhoe and Lemon Cove area.

Commercial sales of navel and Valencia oranges produced in Tulare County topped more than 835 million in 2013, an increase over the prior year.

Gordon added that farmers were grateful for a good start to the Valley’s rainy season, with the substantial rain that fell here last week.

“We’re hopeful we’ll get snow in the mountains and rain in the Valley and good prices” in the coming months, he said.

And some here said they were happy that voters passed Proposition 1 on Tuesday, the state’s \$7.5 billion water bond.

Sherwood noted that with \$2.7 billion of that money going to fund water-storage projects, he hoped a good chunk of it will go to finally building a dam at Temperance Flat — above Millerton Lake — that would substantially increase water storage and make more surface available to farmers along the Friant-Kern Canal.

Citrus industry launches new campaign

If weather and insect-infestations aren't bad enough, many in California's citrus industry say they're getting hit hard by regulations and laws that make it costlier and more difficult to produce their fruit.

So California Citrus Mutual has launched a campaign to let lawmakers and regulators aware of this.

Joel Nelsen, Citrus Mutual's president told the crowd gathered Thursday night for the organization's annual meeting that it has created a "Citrus Strong" website and produced the first of what may be several videos highlighting what the citrus industry contributes to California's economy.

But the video and the website aren't geared to promoting the citrus industry among the general public. Instead it is being directed at lawmakers and regulators, as well as grocery store operators.

"I can assure you citrus strong is going to be on the tongues of every legislator in Sacramento," Nelson said.

Citrus sales generate \$2 billion a year in the state, and Nelson noted stressed that the fruit is produced without harming air and water resources.

Citrus Mutual also hired an ad firm and production company to produce video that it premiered during Thursday night's dinner. It started out with a comet or meteor hitting the earth and was followed by a message about the importance of citrus to the economy and a call for lawmakers and regulators to "stand up" for the industry.

"A strong economy starts with citrus strong," the video's message concluded.

Nelsen said the video would be played in Sacramento in the coming weeks, though Alyssa Houtby, as spokeswoman for Citrus Mutual, said a the video could be modified before it's taken to Sacramento.

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