

World Ag Expo impacted by West Coast port slowdown

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Marlin Tillaart and Frank Schmidt take a closer look at the Earth Talon. The 48th annual World Ag Expo wrapped up yesterday and by most accounts, this year's show was a success.

Organizers reported attendance was strong, especially the second day of the show. Tulare police said there were no security or public safety issues. And for the first time in recent memory, not a drop of rain fell on the annual ag extravaganza.

Final attendance figures will not be announced until later this month, but International Agri-Center CEO Jerry Sinift said this year's event will likely be a record-breaker.

But when they weren't cutting deals, scoping out the latest nut crowders and drip irrigation systems or munching on barbecue, many exhibitors at this year's Farm Show were talking about how the West Coast port slowdown had negatively impacted their businesses – and their plans for this year's World Ag Expo.

Jaime Franco, who was attending his seventh WAE as a sales rep for Willows, Calif.-based Briggs Manufacturing, said his company's pre-cast concrete water troughs were particularly popular this year, "especially with the drought, and people still needing to take care of their cattle or livestock."

Briggs introduced a new, larger 400-gallon trough at this year's show.

But newer versions of the floodgates the company has manufactured overseas were stuck on ships outside the Long Beach harbor.

“They can’t get into port to unload so we didn’t get to display them at the show,” Franco said. “We’ve got customers barking at us to see them so it’s been a little frustrating.”

Greg Luck, a salesman for Grundfos, a Danish groundwater and irrigation pump company that operates a manufacturing facility in Fresno, was also frustrated by the impact the port slowdown was having on his company’s supply chain.

“We’ve got stuff coming in and out of the country all the time,” he said. “We’re trying to keep our inventory levels up but we’ll start running out of stuff sooner than later if this [port slowdown] keeps up.”

Veda Farming, a Salinas-based farm equipment company, was particularly hard hit by the port slowdown. The company, which imports much of its equipment from Italy, could not display new automatic tomato planting equipment at this year’s expo because the machinery was still stuck on container ships and yet to be unloaded in Los Angeles.

Dale Mendoza, president of Fresno-based Quali-T-Ruck Service, a statewide freight transporter, said the port slowdown was “costing us and our customers a lot of money.”

“It’s terrible,” Mendoza said. “We’re having some real issues trying to get containers in and out,” including the shipment for Veda Farming.

Mendoza said he’s spent two weeks trying to get the Farm Show equipment containers for Veda.

“It used to take two hours to load containers out of the port,” Mendoza said. “Now, if you can get in there, it’s taking at least eight or nine [hours].”

“And when they do get this thing resolved,” Mendoza added, “it’s going to take months to deal with the backlog.”

Marlin Tillaart, CEO of Dutchman Industries Inc., a Canadian company that makes tree spades, tree planters and other equipment for the nursery business, was attending his first World Ag Expo.

“This is my first visit to California,” he said.

Tillaart was impressed by his first Farm Show experience. “There are a lot of interesting products here that play a big role in what I do,” he said.

During the course of walking the exhibits, Tillaart said he made contact with a Korean manufacturer able to manufacture metric-sized hydraulic cylinders for his company.

“I can’t get metric-sized cylinders in North America but I need them to sell tree spades to my customers in Asia,” he explained.

The Canadian was particularly impressed with the Earth Talon, a new shovel from Curry Tool Works that was introduced at this year’s show and included on the Top Ten New Products list.

“I could adopt this design to the tree spades we make,” Tillaart said.

Frank Schmidt, a nurseryman from Oregon who grows shade and deciduous tree varieties for ornamental use, visits the WAE “every three or five years because there’s always new models and designs to see.”

“We manufacture quite a bit of our own equipment and this gives us ideas for how we can build better,” he said.

Schmidt added that his company’s shipments to China are going to be impacted by the port slowdown.

“We’re planning on shipping three containers to China and are very concerned right now,” he said.

