

State agriculture board listens to public concerns about drought

By Robert
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Members of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture conduct a drought forum held at the Fresno Fairgrounds, Tuesday, May 5, 2015. CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

- *About 50 people attended Tuesday's meeting of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture to speak about how the drought is affecting them.*
- *Speakers defended the almond industry and lamented a drop in the water table.*
- *After the meeting, members of a task force planned to visit the east Porterville area, where 800 homes are without water.*

There was very little good news at Tuesday's meeting of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture.

And perhaps for good reason. The board gathered at the Fresno Fairgrounds to hear from the public about how the state's historic drought is affecting them.

About 50 people attended the meeting that also included California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross and state officials who updated the board on government's drought relief and conservation plans.

"Nearly everyone is being affected," said Mark S. Ghilarducci, director of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services. "Ag is suffering, the environment is suffering, and we have urban areas that literally have run out of water."

Ghilarducci, who is part of a state drought task force, said that after the meeting he and other members of the task force were planning to visit the east Porterville area, where 800 homes are without water. In all, there are about 1,800 wells that have gone dry in the state. Other counties in the region with dry wells include Mariposa, Kern and Tuolumne.

Not only has the drought dried up farmer's fields and homeowner's wells, it has also significantly increased the danger of wildfires.

"This is an evolving disaster," he said. "And it is getting worse and expanding as the days go on."

To deal with the drought, Ghilarducci said, Gov. Jerry Brown has responded by signing a \$1.1 billion drought relief and flood protection package. Millions are being made available for rental assistance, food donations and 1,500-gallon water tanks for homeowners with dry wells.

Ghilarducci said that as part of the governor's executive order, the state has increased the penalties for wasting water. The worst offenders could receive a fine of up to \$10,000 per violation.

Almond farmers have recently been skewered by critics for its water use. Growers are being blamed for using an unfair share to grow their crop.

Mike Mason, a Kern County almond grower, called the criticism "hyperbolic attacks." Mason said almond farmers have received little to no surface water and have had to rely on pumping less desirable ground water. He also said that despite the perception that farmers are using too much water, he said a majority, 70%, are using water efficient drip irrigation.

Overall, the almond industry — centered in the San Joaquin Valley — is using 33% less water than it did 25 years ago.

Mason said he wants the public to know that almond farmers aren't the bad guys.

"We produce a healthy product for a health conscious society," Mason said.

Rural Fresno County resident Ted Miller issued a warning to members of the board that many already understood: the more groundwater that is pumped, the lower the water table will drop.

Miller, who lives in Caruthers, said that the water level in his area has dropped an average of two feet a year over the past 70 years.

In the last 15 months, the water table has plummeted 10 feet. Miller had to install a new well recently that went down 400 feet. He figures he is OK for the time being. But he realizes many others won't be.

"We are seeing an acceleration in the drop of groundwater," Miller said. "And it has become very serious."

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