

University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources



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Speaking about education for children of farmworkers are Sandy Curwood (from left), with the Conejo Valley Unified School District; Myriam Grajales, program manager for UC News & Outreach; and Bill Frost, with the University of California. The three were participating in a UC Cooperative Extension meeting Wednesday in Oxnard.

Business

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Lands crumbling

■ Growers run into roadblocks

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The top issues facing Ventura County's agriculture producers not only have continued since researchers began studying the industry a century ago, but they also are now worse.

That was the key message, eclipsed when possible with positive news, at an agriculture symposium Wednesday in Oxnard that marked the 100th anniversary of the local industry's partner and supporter, the UC Cooperative Extension in Ventura County and the Hansen Agricultural Research and Extension Center.

Researchers and scientists from the cooperative gave the mainly agriculture-related visitors at the Courtyard by Marriott hotel the history and current status of decreasing farmland, rising operating costs, the threat of constricted water use, decreasing labor and more invasive pests.

Deforestation is a "pretty troubling trend" in the county, Oleg Daugovish, a strawberry and vegetable adviser, told the audience in his presentation on how crops



Phil McGrath, owner of McGrath Farms, talks with Anna Howell, staff research associate with University of California Agricultural and Natural Resources.

have changed over time.

The county is losing a significant amount of growing land — 3,000 acres per year — primarily to development and mainly because of rising production costs, Daugovish said.

Growers of strawberries, the county's leading crop since the early 2000s, spend about \$45,000 per acre a year to grow the fruit, he said. They face constant pressures to be more efficient.

"We can't compete when the same crops come from somewhere where costs are cheaper," Daugovish said.

Growers, who have responded to rising costs by switching to higher-value crops, are now faced with decreasing water supplies and possible restrictions because the crops are water-intensive. Daugovish's figures show how water pumping amounts per acre-foot have spiked since 1994 during the typical October strawberry planting.

"We can't avoid this topic," Daugovish said.

Ben Faber, an expert with the extension on soils, water and subtropical crops, discussed how crop

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changes in the county have created a "conflict with water."

The average annual rainfall in Oxnard, where most of the county's \$690 million in strawberries are grown, was 17 inches between 2003 and 2008, and not as much since then. Now, he said, "We're living in an environment that rarely sees the average rainfall."

These days Faber's work includes showing growers how using too much or too little water is more likely to cause plant disease and demonstrating new ways of measuring the water content in soil. His workshops are in English and Spanish, he said.

Recycled water is one alternative available for nurseries, an industry moving north from the San Diego area, Faber said. Using it has saved 14 percent to 42 percent of total water use, he said, but the savings per acre have been larger for larger nurseries.

Invasive pests such as weeds, insects and fungi present another

challenge to agriculture and are getting worse, said Jim Downer, an expert on environmental horticulture and plant pathology with the UC Cooperative Extension.

California is particularly vulnerable to exotic pests because of its vast and varying geography and climates, Downer said. The state is second to Florida for the number of invertebrate pests introduced, with seven to eight exotic pests invading a year.

The transport of residential yard waste from other counties to use as mulch on Ventura County growing fields is helping spread pests, Downer said. The processes to transfer and use that waste do not always kill them, he said.

"How we deal with our waste can affect how we deal with our pests," Downer said.

Growing crops, however, means nothing unless there is labor to harvest them. John Krist, CEO of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County, told the audience California growers' historical reliance on a foreign workforce is at a critical point because that

source is shrinking.

Labor came first from the Chinese, as far back as 1848, Krist said, and shifted to a Japanese workforce and then the present Mexican laborers.

The best statistics available show 95 percent of Ventura County's agriculture labor is foreign-born and almost entirely Mexican, Krist said, using 2004 data from the National Agricultural Workforce Survey.

That affects all of agriculture and particularly the county's leading crops because they are hand-picked, Krist said. In season, strawberries are picked every three days from the county's 12,000 acres, he said.

Wages, which hover around \$10 to \$12 an hour, have stagnated or declined, while housing costs have increased, Krist said.

The effect on growers is fewer laborers to harvest fruit or delayed harvests, he said, and farmers miss the windows to sell the fruit when prices are their highest, Krist said.

"Even delays have great economic repercussions for us," he said.