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Summit searches for agricultural solutions



Craig McNamara, president of Sierra Farms, delivers the keynote address Wednesday at the CalCAN Climate and Agriculture Summit at UC Davis. In his talk, McNamara sounded a stark warning about wasted food resources. Sue Cockrell/Enterprise photo

By Felicia Alvarez

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California farmers have a lot on their plate.

Juggling soil depletions, wildlife endangerment, water crises and ever-changing government regulations, more than 300 farmers, conservationists and scientists met for the CalCAN Climate and Agriculture Summit on Wednesday to tackle the dilemmas that face California farmers.

CalCAN, or the California Climate and Agriculture Network, is an organization dedicated to supporting farmers who strive to fight climate change with sustainable practices.

In the face of adversity, California growers and other representatives kept a positive outlook for the future, hoping to change the agricultural systems to make a more sustainable California.

“We are facing epic drought conditions and have to take steps to prevent the collapse of California agriculture,” said Craig McNamara, one of the event’s keynote speakers.

McNamara is the president of Sierra Farms and is a longtime supporter of sustainable farm systems. His own farm is a “zero-tillage” operation that helps preserve the state of water and soil on the land.

In his keynote address, McNamara stressed efficiency in food systems as one means of decreasing green house gases. Across the United States, 40 percent of all food goes uneaten. McNamara stressed how taxing the process of making this food is on America’s infrastructure. Eighty percent of water and 50 percent of land in the United States is dedicated to food production, McNamara cited.

To illustrate this, McNamara used the example of milk, chiding to a full crowd about the all too familiar difficulties of expiration dates of quick-spoiling milk.

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“But when you throw it out,” his tone darkened, “it goes straight to the landfill and becomes methane gas ... we can’t afford to do that anymore.”

Food waste, such as McNamara’s milk in the back of the fridge, tells a bleak tale for the environment. Methane gas aside, estimates say at least 100 gallons of water went into the production for just one gallon of milk.

A greater paradox, however, is that in the face of all of this food waste, individuals still go hungry. In Yolo County, 16.9 percent of people are food insecure; among that population, 23.7 percent are children.

Experts like McNamara examined these challenges at the CalCAN Summit, looking for solutions in science, policy, and practice.

One potential solution comes in the form of state Senate Bill 267 which was unveiled at the Summit. The legislation presents a framework for incentives and support for farmers with environmentally friendly operations. This support would come in the form of low-interest loans, assistance or educational materials.

“(The bill) would put into play a blueprint for funding programs for projects like soil building, renewable energy, water efficiency and wildlife conservation,” said Renata Brillinger, executive director of CalCAN.

While recognizing farmer’s ability to reduce greenhouse gases, the bill would also provide assistance to small-scale farmers who may struggle to stay afloat while trying to balance eco-friendly operations.

Small-scale farmer Liza Sternik travelled to the CalCAN Summit from her farm in Fairfax to hear proposals just like this one. Her farm, Worker Bee Farm, operates on three acres and uses organic compost.

In terms of change, Sternik wants to see more opportunities for grants for small farms.

“It’s important to encourage farmers to have ownership over a piece of land, instead of getting knocked over by Big Ag,” she said.

Other farmers such as Tom Broz of Live Earth Farm near Santa Cruz look to biodiversity as a solution for the perils that face California agriculture.

Live Earth Farm is an 80-acre operation that integrates wildlife and natural ecosystems into its farming. By adding perennials, such a native grasses, and introducing certain native insects to his farm, Broz has eliminated the need to use most pesticides. At the same time, the soils on the landscape remain rich and wildlife species like red-tailed hawks are given a place to thrive.

“It comes with certain management difficulties, such as food safety regulations and predators, but it’s worth it,” Broz explained.

Estimates predict that California will be 3-5 degrees hotter on average by 2050, explained Louis Jackson, an ecology researcher with UC Davis.

“This means that the climate of Yolo County would be more like Merced County,” she said.

“When this happens, what plants are you going to wish you planted?” Jackson asked. Jackson emphasizes the role of working with ecosystems and implementing operations such as Broz’s that help keep soils healthy in the face of climate change.

Biodiversity was one of many agricultural solutions offered at the CalCAN Summit. Other topics included growing clean energy, introducing new agricultural programs on a state level, analyzing drought solutions, and conserving farmland.

At the end of the day, leaders looked to the new generation of young farmers today and individual’s capacity to change the world.

“The solution to climate change is in our hands,” McNamara said, “let’s do it today.”

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"Eighty percent of water and 50 percent of land in the United States is dedicated to food production, McNamara cited."

Here in CA, because of the drought, it is imperative that farmers be brought into discussions of how to manage our most precious of resources, water. It is supposed to happen with the new groundwater management legislation that was just approved. It's about time!

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