

UC Davis summit focuses on drought

By Sarah Dowling , Woodland Daily Democrat

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The Vic Fazio Wildlife Area in the Yolo Bypass appears bone dry in this aerial photograph. Lawmakers and farmers are warning about the effects of a long-term drought on wildlife and the economy. Mark Jones-Special to The Democrat



With a slideshow of farm pictures playing behind them, Kellyx Nelson of the San Mateo County Resource Conservation District, right, leads a

panel featuring rancher Joe Morris and farmers Tom Willey and Jutta Thoerner who shared their experience with the drought. Deo Ferrer-Daily Democrat

California farmers gathered at UC Davis Wednesday to discuss the most pressing issue currently affecting agriculture — the drought.

“The agricultural sector needs to be a part of climate change to help come up with solutions and make a difference,” said keynote speaker Ken Alex, senior policy adviser to Gov. Jerry Brown.

Alex’s statement set the tone for the daylong event, hosted by the California Climate and Agricultural Network, a coalition formed out of concern for climate change and its effect on agriculture.

Now in its fourth year, the Climate and Agriculture Summit brought together farmers, ranchers, educators and policy makers to look for ways to deal with the drought, including conservation and management methods.

To learn about the drought’s ripple effects from those who experience them first-hand, a trio of ag representatives — Tom Willey, Joe Morris and Jutta Thoerner — shared their perspectives.

Willey and his wife, Denesse, own and operate T&D Willey Farms, a 75-acre certified organic operation in Madera County.

Willey, who started his farm in 1981, said in his region everyone is drilling wells because the Madera Irrigation District has no water to allocate to farmers. More than five years ago Willey drilled a new 500-foot well on his property, right before it started getting drier.

“It’s just a matter of time for all of us,” he said, referring to wells drying up.

Much like what is being seen in Yolo County, Willey equated the planting of almond trees to the California

gold rush, stating farmers are pulling out other crops to make room for rows upon rows of nut trees, which use more water.

“Around 1,000 acres of wine grapes were bulldozed to make room for almond trees,” he said. “Wine grapes use three acre-feet of water per year, while almonds use four acre-feet of water.”

Thoerner is seeing the opposite near her 200-acre farm in San Luis Obispo County, where she specializes in walnuts.

“A lot of people are pulling out or abandoning trees and planting wine grapes,” she said.

In terms of her experience with the drought, since Thoerner dry farms her orchards, she depends on the rain more than others. With the lack of precipitation, she noticed a 30 percent drop in her yield since the drought began.

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Not only are her trees producing less, the nuts that are produced are much smaller, prompting her to call them “babies.”

Morris takes the perspective of a rancher.

In 1991, he and his wife, Julie, founded San Benito County’s T.O. Cattle Company, which specializes in grass-fed beef.

Raising animals instead of crops presents a different set of challenges — water is needed both to quench his herd’s thirst and to keep grass alive, which is essential with grass-fed beef.

“A lot of ranchers are selling off livestock,” he said, noting it could be a “help and a hinderance.”

Specifically, less cattle means more water for other things, but less meat for consumers, he added.

As their discussion continued, moderator Kellyx Nelson of the San Mateo County Resource Conservation District asked each panelist what they were doing to conserve water and manage their businesses.

Wiley said his farm has run on drip irrigation for more than 20 years. This system brings water directly to the roots instead of elsewhere in the fields so less water is wasted.

Wiley has had to eliminate a number of crops that do not produce well in a drought, focusing efforts on ones that do.

Thoerner utilizes sheep to graze around her 10-acre vineyard “to help maintain the moisture in the soil.”

While Thoerner and Wiley discussed conservation methods, Morris said it is important for farmers and ranchers to take time off from worrying about the drought because this can cause a whole new set of problems.

“The drought is an emotional roller coaster,” Morris said. “You can get depressed thinking about it.”

After hearing from the panel, longtime farmer Judith Redmond approached to podium to share her thoughts on climate change.

In 1989, Redmond co-founded Full Belly Farm, a 350-acre operation in the Capay Valley.

During her brief presentation, Redmond said everyone needs to work together to combat climate change and find solutions.

“Leadership is needed from all of us to convince the public that farmers and agriculture are a climate change investment that will pay off dividends to all of us, the environment, the economy, and for rural communities,” Redmond said.

The speaker portion of the event concluded with an awards ceremony, recognizing leadership within the realm of agriculture.

Sen. Lois Wolk, who was unable to attend the summit, was recognized for her work in the state legislature where she has worked on issues related to climate change and agriculture policy.

UCD professor Stephen Wheeler received the second leadership award for his research on climate change adaption and benefits of agricultural land preservation in Yolo County.

The final award, meant for Craig McNamara of Sierra Orchards, was absent from the ceremony. McNamara founded the Center for Land-Based Learning, an organization charged with training the next generation of farmers.

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