

Experts to address severe South Texas water shortage

WESLACO – Experts from throughout the state will gather in Weslaco on Jan. 29 to discuss options with growers facing severe water shortages this growing season, according to Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service personnel.

“Some of the larger water districts with large tracts of agricultural lands have told their growers they will receive only one irrigation this year,” said Brad Cowan, an AgriLife Extension agent in Hidalgo County. “Sugarcane, citrus and vegetables all require five to eight or more irrigations, so you can see the severe impact this water shortage is likely to have on agriculture this year.”

The expected water shortage is already challenging growers, he said.

“Many growers have been purchasing additional water and making decisions on which crops, both high- and low-water use crops, to plant and how many of those crops they will be able to sustain. But even grain sorghum or cotton, both traditional crops that are known to perform well with limited water require two irrigations most years.”



A young sugarcane field is irrigated in Hidalgo County. (AgriLife Extension photo by Brad Cowan)

To help weigh their options, growers are invited to attend the 8th Rio Grande Valley Irrigation Conference and Trade Show, to be held from 7:30 a.m.- 3:30 p.m. Jan. 29 at the Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Extension Center, 2401 E. Business Highway 83 in Weslaco.

Registration is \$20. The fee includes breakfast, lunch, refreshments and admission to the trade show and all technical sessions.

“We will have several trade show exhibitors on hand who provide excellent information and the latest in technology,” Cowan said. “There is always good interaction between growers and exhibitors.”

One hour of Texas Department of Agriculture continuing education units will be offered for license holders, and four hours of certified crops advisors credits.

“Some of the smaller of the 26 irrigation districts in the Lower Rio Grande Valley are not on restrictions, or allocations, yet,” Cowan said, “but the vast majority of agriculture here will feel the pinch unless things change dramatically and soon. Growers should contact their irrigation districts if they haven’t already to determine their particular situation.”

Cowan said even dryland cotton acreage, which relies solely on rainfall, will likely be down this year.

“The market outlook for cotton prices to the grower is uncertain,” he said. “Prices were down last year and they show no signs of improving this year. Grain sorghum prices, on the other hand, look strong, so we may see an increase in grain acreage.”

Grain prices are closely tied to corn prices because the two are interchangeable as feed grains, Cowan said.

“And corn prices are up for a couple of reasons. One is because consumption is higher, and the other is because growers in the Midwest had a tough time with drought last year. So, demand is up and supply is down and that equals higher market prices for corn, grain sorghum and soybeans.”

Despite the predicted water shortages, Cowan said growers remain generally optimistic.

"A good rain or two up in the watershed would sure help the outlook as planting season approaches. It will be interesting to see if rain develops in our forecast," he said.

The irrigation conference is sponsored by AgriLife Extension, the Lower Rio Grande Valley Water District Managers Association and the Texas Agricultural Irrigation Association.

Speakers and their topics include: "Current Water Supply Situation and Forecast for 2013," Erasmo Yarrito Jr., Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Harlingen; "Status of Cost Share Funds for Growers," Jim Kjølgaard, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Corpus Christi; "Weather Forecast for the 2013 Growing Season," Barry Goldsmith, National Weather Service, Brownsville; "I Have One Irrigation for the Season, Now What?" Dr. Charles Stichler, AgriLife Extension (retired), Knippa; "Crop Selection, More Important Than Ever," Dr. Travis Miller, AgriLife Extension, College Station; "What's New in Irrigation Technology?" Dr. Guy Fipps, AgriLife Extension, College Station; and "Practical Use of Soil Moisture Sensors to Conserve Water," Dr. Robert Schwartz, U.S.D.A., Bushland.

The speaker at lunch will be Dr. Bryan Shaw, chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Austin. There will also be a panel discussion, "Irrigation District Water Conservation Improvement Projects," led by Fipps; Dr. Gabriele Bonaiti, AgriLife Extension agricultural engineering program specialist, College Station; and Dr. Bert Clemmens, West Consulting, Inc., Phoenix, Arizona.

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