

Watsonville farm conference focuses on water conservation

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Watsonville >> Pajaro Valley farmers are on track to break irrigation records in 2014 after tapping groundwater at unusually high levels during the first quarter of the year.

Drought drove demand, and the combination of inadequate rainfall and heavy irrigation is adding stress to a strained groundwater basin.

That was the sobering backdrop to an irrigation and water conservation conference Thursday at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds. More than 100 farmers, landowners, irrigators resource experts, agricultural consultants and vendors attended.

"I have an interest in the land. That's why I'm here," said Diane Porter Cooley, who has preserved more than 300 acres of farmland through a agricultural easement. "It doesn't matter if the property is saved if there's no water."

For years, more water has been pulled for the Pajaro Valley groundwater basin than can be recharged by yearly rains, a condition known as overdraft. Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency hydrologist Brian Lockwood told the crowd that progress has been made toward a solution, and a plan has been developed to further the cause. Water conservation is a big part of the plan, and that's what makes this year's numbers disturbing.

During the past three months, a time of year when little irrigation is usually needed, farmers pumped more than 11,000 acre feet of groundwater, about 20 percent of the average for a total year and 1,000 acre feet more than the previous first quarter high in 2008.

An acre foot is 326,000 gallons, in general enough for to supply two families for a year or irrigate a half acre of strawberries.

"It's a critical situation," Lockwood said. "That's why it's so good to see so many people participating today."

Tamara Murvetagoiena, sustainability manager for Driscoll's Berries, said preserving resources is increasingly important to consumers and the retailers that serve them. Whole Foods and Walmart are among the major chains that require farmers to meet sustainability criteria or will in the near future. Water tops a list of concerns, she said.

"We're going from a place where it's nice to do it, to it's the only way to get access to the market," she said.

Vendors offered ways to minimize water use and to get the most from irrigation, from electronic probes to pinpoint how much to irrigate to a system that changes the polarity of water molecules to aid diffusion and reduce evaporation.

Russel Maridon, founder of AgRite, promoted his system that fully automates irrigation and fertilization. At a Lakeview Drive raspberry farm, the system was able to cut average water use by 40 percent in 2013, he said.

Berry grower Richard Uyematsu has been farming in the Pajaro Valley for 35 years. He uses recycled water

on his strawberry fields near the coast, and also technology to monitor soil moisture. But he continues to look for ways to conserve, and the conference gave him the chance to check out automated irrigation systems.

"We have to be able to use water more efficiently," he said.