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Report to supervisors highlights drought's impact on county

By Seth Nidever
snidever@HanfordSentinel.com

Tuesday's Kings County supervisors meeting was a good opportunity to consider the ever-encroaching impact of drought on Kings County. It was a glimpse into what happens when you take the fertile ground in this area and subtract the irrigation water. The result — a sunburned desert landscape — isn't pretty.

Kings County agricultural commissioner/sealer Tim Niswander narrated a slide show and gave statistics highlighting a study of the cumulative effects of three consecutive years of drought on local farming.

"I think it's important for people to see the visuals. I think it's important for people in Kings County who think they might not be affected," said supervisor Richard Valle, who represents some of the hardest hit areas in Corcoran, Avenal and Kettleman City.

In this year alone, from about July 1 to Aug. 7, the county ag commissioner's office estimates that growers lost \$58.5 million in potential crop income. That translates into a much larger impact when you factor in the trickle-down economic impact of harvesting, packing, shipping and the like.

On paper, the impact doesn't seem large — a 3.3 percent decline over 2008 crop values.



In a photo exhibited at the Kings County Board of Supervisors meeting Tuesday, approximately 600 acres sit fallow in the vicinity of Kettleman City.

But visually, the areas heavily impacted look like moonscapes.

"Overall, county-wide, it doesn't seem that bad, but where it is bad, it isn't good," Niswander said in a phone interview.

Niswander's virtual tour depicted some of the affected areas. They are scattered all over the county. It's not just on the Westside, which has been getting the lion's share of attention because of environmental restrictions on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River delta.

Some of Niswander's slides were from the dry bottom of the long-vanished Tulare Lake, a vast area of giant fields and huge farming companies like J.G. Boswell Co.

Now, in many places, instead of fields of green, it's barren swaths of dirt and seas of drought-tolerant safflower.

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The most obvious impact of drought is less planted acreage — 7.3 percent of the county's soil is going unused because of drought, according the ag commissioner.

But there are other effects the layman might miss.

One is the decline in double cropping. That refers to when farmers squeeze in two crops in the same field in one growing season — say, for example, winter wheat followed by corn.

With water in scarce supply, double cropping has declined by 30 to 40 percent, according to Steve Wright, cotton advisor for Kings and Tulare counties.

Another factor: Declining yields. The reason? Salty well water that contaminates the soil and stunts plant growth.

That's always been an issue in parts of the county, but it's been balanced out by clean surface water that tamps down the salts, Wright said. This year, however, surface water has been largely unavailable.

Niswander showed supervisors photos of salt stains atop plowed fields.

Then, of course, there is the runaway unemployment among Hispanic farm laborers who literally depend on the soil producing a plentiful harvest.

Don Mills, Kings County Water District general manager, left supervisors with this dismal assessment: "My professional opinion is that 25 to 30 percent of ag land (in Kings County) will need to be retired ... unless we can rectify the surface water being taken from the Valley. We really are struggling to show how important it is."

The reporter can be reached at 583-2432.