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Colorado River Plan Ushers in an Uncertain New Water Reality

The only thing certain about the Colorado River is that the water it supplies to farmers is growing more uncertain. That changes things.

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Manager

The federal Bureau of Reclamation has finalized its plans to guide river management for the next 10 years.

The framework offers a clearer picture of how deep cuts could go and who could feel the pain most acutely.

Yet little feels settled. Or certain.

And that is still a problem. For all of us.

Colorado River cuts could also impact farms that rely on groundwater. Photo by AZFB

Why is Certainty Important?

The arid West cannot prosper without a reliable, long-term water supply.

We need this kind of certainty to make wise water management decisions, to decide which crops to plant, to attract outside economic investment and get loans to make those investments ourselves.

For decades, the Colorado River was seen as the utmost in reliability — so much so that most cities in metro Phoenix base their required 100-year water supplies on it.

But the river is shrinking. Flows are down a third on average since 2020, to about 10 million acre-feet a year.

This, despite a century of water law that all but guarantees the seven basin states access to at least 15 million acre-feet.

Even 20 years ago, when shortage planning began in earnest, the rules were set to offer certainty — so cuts could proceed predictably for all involved.

That's no longer the case.

Water Cuts Could Vary Wildly

According to the new guidelines, annual water releases from Lake Powell could be as low as 5 million acre-feet, which could tank Lake Mead, or as high as 12, which could build it up.

(Given projected elevations at Lake Powell, however, annual releases of 6 to 7 million acre-feet are most likely through 2028.)

Meanwhile, mandatory water cuts for the next decade could range from 1.25 million acre-feet to as much as 3 million acre-feet a year.

That's a painful cut for Central Arizona Project users at the low end, but a catastrophic one on the high end that could dry up the canal and hamper Yuma's ability to feed the nation in the winter.

These are vastly different scenarios that require vastly different responses.

Reclamation says it wants to offer a broad breadth of possibilities to better match conditions and offer flexibility as new operational plans take shape every two years.

But it also ensures that states remain in a constant state of negotiation — and uncertainty about their future.

2-Year Plan is Not Guaranteed

Water levels at Lake Mead, pictured here in July 2022, reached new lows in August. Photo courtesy of United States Bureau of Reclamation

Fortunately, the first 2-year plan largely reflects what Arizona, California and Nevada had proposed earlier this summer:

Smaller overall cuts that are shared more equitably among the three states, with extra capacity to store water in Lake Mead and a newly created federal pool to fulfill tribal water obligations.

But that doesn't necessarily take more painful actions off the table through 2028.

The plan stipulates that states may be asked to do more once Lake Mead is forecast to hit 1,010 feet of elevation — a mark it already is projected to hit by next summer.

How much more? No one knows.

What Might Later Years Look Like?

It's even less clear what cuts could look like in the second 2-year plan — much less the third, fourth or fifth.

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Arizona High Court Delivers Tax Fairness Win for Orchard and Vineyard Owners

By Julie Murphree,
Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Strategic Communications

While wins in agriculture feel rare these days, Cochise County farmers netted a big one for all of us in Arizona.

In Cochise County, tree-nut growers and other permanent-crop producers faced a 2023 property-tax assessment that effectively layered two valuation methods onto the same acreage. The county assessor first applied the statutory income approach to the land itself—setting values at $1,800 per acre—then separately assigned market-based values of $12,000 per acre to orchard trees and $8,000 per acre to vineyard vines, adding the figures together. The result was higher full-cash values and larger tax bills for operations whose productive assets are the very trees and vines that generate agricultural income.

Cochise growers took the tax fight to the courts that led all the way to the Arizona Supreme Court.

In an official news release issued by the Arizona Supreme Court, Justice Maria Elena Cruz, writing for the unanimous Court, explained that allowing assessors to assign a separate market value to permanent crops would reintroduce market considerations that the Arizona Legislature expressly directed assessors to disregard when valuing agricultural property. It also determined that separately valuing the crops after applying the statutory income approach would effectively subject the same agricultural value to two valuation methodologies, contrary to the Legislature's prohibition against double taxation.

Permanent-crop producers faced a 2023 property-tax assessment that effectively layered two valuation methods onto the same acreage.

A group of those owners challenged the dual valuation in Arizona Tax Court. The Tax Court ruled in their favor, holding that permanent crops must be valued together with the underlying land under the income approach prescribed by state statute. The Court of Appeals later affirmed. On July 24, 2026, the Ar-

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IN THIS ISSUE...

Texas is Playing Whack-a-Mole with New World Screwworm. Arizona Can Learn from That

Texas's first New World Screwworm outbreaks spread unpredictably, and that offers important lessons for Arizona.

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Manager

Texas's first New World Screwworm cases did not appear immediately across the border with infested states in Mexico.

Instead, they were confirmed in a smattering of counties north, south and west of San Antonio that do not border each other.

Epidemiologists are scrambling to explain why, particularly when no cases have been confirmed in wildlife and no wild flies have been captured in traps.

But the early days of infestation in Texas offer lessons for Arizona.

1. It's Tough to Predict Movement

Screwworms need the right mix of heat, moisture and brush to replicate. But a checkerboard of cases in Texas suggests how difficult it may be to predict where they head next.

Decades ago, when the screwworm was last in Arizona, mid-elevation grazing lands in southern and eastern Arizona were hit harder than upper-elevation ranches and dairies in central Arizona.

Is that still the case?

Livestock moves more often and over greater distances now, and it's unclear whether hotter winters and more intense storms will push the fly into new territory.

"The last time we had a New World Screwworm infestation was 50 years ago, when this was a very different Arizona," said Leigh Combrink, who studies wildlife diseases at University of Arizona.

She is developing a forecasting tool to help answer those questions, based on one already developed for state health officials that predicts West Nile virus movements in Arizona.

The effort is part of a multifaceted $3.74 million federal grant the university received to prepare for the pest's arrival.

By analyzing complex climate, landscape, livestock and wildlife data, the tool could predict areas at heightened risk of an outbreak and test the outcome of various responses.

2. Don't Wait to Minimize Risk

That would be welcome help in Texas, where the response to new cases has been more like a game of whack-a-mole.

Thankfully, quick reporting and treatment — combined with strategic sterile fly releases — have helped minimize damage and contain infestations.

Ranchers are rapidly adapting their herd management practices to lower the risk of an outbreak, said Tracy Tomascik, who specializes in livestock health issues at Texas Farm Bureau.

Because screwworms frequently lay eggs in wounds, many Texas ranchers have reduced running cattle through chutes, improved corrals and repaired facilities to minimize the risk of scrapes.

Some have chosen to postpone calving season and are waiting to dehorn or castrate animals until winter, when lower temperatures are expected to suppress fly activity.

New World Screwworm flies are about the same size as a common housefly. Photo courtesy of USDA

Tomascik urged Arizona ranchers to not to wait for an outbreak to take similar steps. He emphasized talking now with their veterinarian about a response plan.

"Our recommendation has been to sit down and write out the steps you'll take if and when you end up in an infestation or surveillance zone," he said.

3. Staff Up Now for Inspections

According to the federal playbook, which Texas is following and Arizona intends to follow, animal health officials must establish a 12-mile infestation and surveillance zone around a confirmed case.

No warm-blooded animal can leave the zone without an official inspection and permit.

"That was a pain point initially, but more people have become certified inspectors," Tomascik said. "We've learned that you're never going to have too many people to do inspections and write certificates."

As part of its grant, University of Arizona plans to train veterinarians and others to follow inspection protocols and collect maggot samples using virtual reality.

"It's one thing to look at photos," said Amy Ganguli, a UA extension specialist overseeing the grant. "It's another to see it in a more realistic setting."

Researchers also plan to support peer training sessions led by Arizona Cattle Growers' Association and collect experiences from those who lived with New World Screwworm decades ago to help inform appropriate responses today.

4. Technology Holds Great Promise

The first confirmed screwworm maggot sample in Texas famously got a police escort to expedite its analysis.

But the process to officially confirm screwworm cases could get cumbersome as cases ramp up, considering that each sample must be visually inspected in an Iowa lab.

If it becomes acceptable to utilize other forms of identification, UA researchers will use part of the grant to develop a quicker DNA test that could be run in batches with a high degree of accuracy.

This technology could help process results more efficiently and be used in remote areas, further speeding detection and treatment.

The university also is exploring whether virtual fencing technology and satellite-based GPS ear tags can be used to help monitor cattle for signs of screwworm.

Some of these technologies are now able to monitor an animal's activity or heart rate, said Flavie Audoin, a rangeland extension specialist who is heading up this research.

This information could potentially be used to alert a rancher when an animal grows sluggish or could be in distress, offering real-time monitoring in rugged areas where cattle may not be seen for days.

The prospect caught the attention of Dalton Dobson, an Apache County cow-calf rancher and Arizona Farm Bureau member who was already eyeing GPS ear tags to monitor the output of his bulls.

"It may not be feasible now to put them in every animal," he said. "But covering even a third or a quarter might have real value, especially if the tags are reusable."

If you suspect screwworms

Early detection and reporting are critical. If you suspect a case:

- Immediately isolate the animal
- Contact your veterinarian
- Report the case to diseasereporting@azda.gov

Pick up a free screwworm sampling kit at your county extension office. Find additional resources at azfb.org/advocacy. Click on "New World Screwworm."

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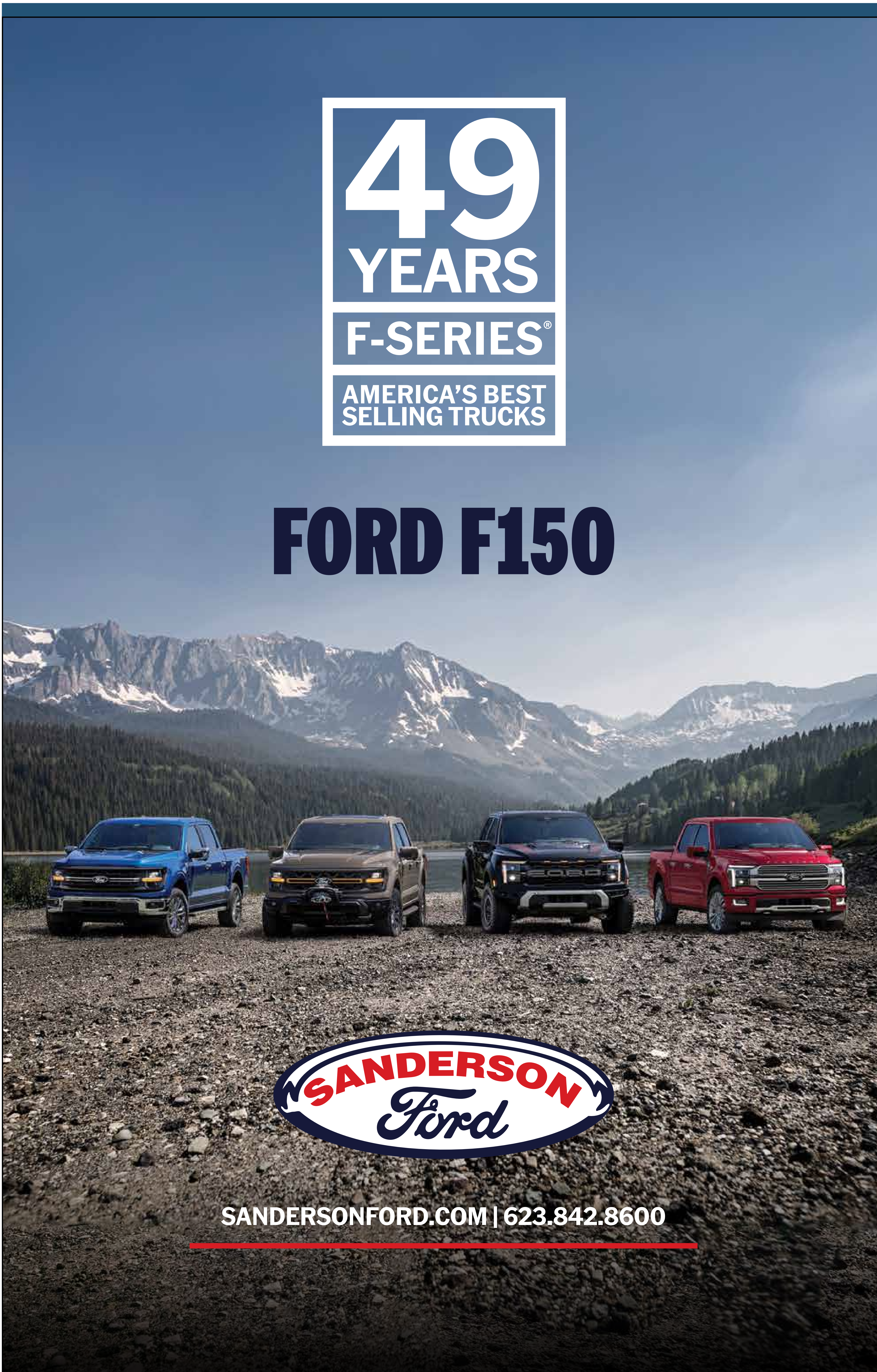
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Where Will Farmers Turn if the Electricity They Need Goes Away?

Hydropower is diminishing at Lake Mead as water levels fall, but irrigation districts are banding together to find alternatives.

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Manager

Hydropower has no direct substitute. It doesn't emit the greenhouse gases of coal or natural gas.

It's available any time, unlike solar and wind, to meet spikes in demand.

And it's cheap.

But the outlook for hydropower — a source that fills up to half of some Arizona irrigation and electrical districts' power needs — is growing increasingly grim.

Lake Powell could be too low to generate any electricity in more than half the years through 2060.

And Lake Mead's capacity could fall to a third of what it is now by spring. It's forecast to remain there most of the time through 2039.

Transmission lines move electricity generated by hydropower at Lake Mead. Photo by AZFB

Hydropower Costs Could Skyrocket

Water levels are plummeting at the nation's two largest reservoirs, and that is making hydropower more expensive to generate.

If production falls too much, it could quickly become among the most expensive forms of energy, potentially forcing buyers to walk away from their long-term contracts.

That's a problem for federal officials, which rely on hydropower revenue to operate and maintain the lakes.

And it's a problem for farmers, which depend on affordable power to pump and deliver water for irrigation.

"This is an emergency," said Dennis Delaney, general manager at Southwest Public Power Agency, which helps find and manage power for irrigation and electrical districts.

"We can replace lost energy, no problem, but replacing the lost capacity that hydropower provides is the challenge. The whole region is scrambling to add capacity."

Without sufficient capacity — the ability to store and distribute power at a moment's notice when demand spikes — systems can become overloaded, unable to supply electricity when it's most needed.

Small Districts are Joining Forces

Replacing lost capacity won't be cheap or easy, particularly as hydropower diminishes and as intensifying heat and proliferating technology increase demand.

And that is only going to make electricity more expensive.

Few irrigation or electrical districts have the resources to bolster capacity on their own.

But many are banding together to build facilities that can.

About 50 entities have joined a large-scale solar and battery storage project in Eloy that could be online by December 2027.

The 400-megawatt solar and 400-megawatt battery project now in the final stages of approval can generate and store energy for when it's needed.

It also would be connected to the Western Area Power Administration's distribution network — which already moves electricity generated by hydropower — to help replace some of Lake Mead's lost energy capacity.

"It's not going to solve everything," said Patrick Ledger, CEO of Arizona Generation and Transmission Cooperatives, which is shepherding the Eloy project for its members.

"But it's a really good first step to provide a little bit of safe harbor, some flexibility and resource diversity for customers."

Many are Turning to Batteries

Electrical District 3 — which serves residents in Maricopa and Stanfield, as well as providing power to irrigate about 65,000 acres — only gets about 7% of its electricity from hydropower.

But demand for power is growing quickly as growth in Maricopa accelerates.

The district has made substantial investments in natural gas, solar and battery storage since 2020.

It is banking on the Eloy project to help fill expected hydropower losses at Lake Mead.

"At a time when demand is rising, this sharp reduction (in hydropower) creates risk and uncertainty for electric cooperatives and not-for-profit electrical districts across Arizona," general manager Brian Yerges wrote in a letter of support for the project.

Many other districts wrote similar letters, noting the need for additional projects that can provide long-term capacity — including solar and battery storage or natural gas peaker plants that only turn on when demand spikes.

What About Lake Mead?

Though this is critical work for the long term, challenges remain in the short term.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation has no real plans to replace lost power at Lake Powell.

And while plans are taking shape at Lake Mead to replace a handful of turbines that can operate at lower water levels, they are unlikely to be in place before the Eloy project or others become operational.

Even if all 17 turbines are replaced, it's unclear how much time that buys before water levels at Lake Mead are too low to generate any hydropower.

These shakeups could force districts to buy expensive backup sources on the open market.

Many are combining their purchasing power ahead of time in hopes of getting a better deal.

Meanwhile, officials are exploring whether it makes sense to install batteries at Lake Mead to store hydropower, excess solar power or any other available electricity.

"Solar is sometimes so abundant that generators will pay you to take it," said Jordy Fuentes, executive director of Arizona Power Authority, which manages Arizona's share of hydropower from Lake Mead.

"Imagine turning a low-capacity resource like that into one that has the capacity utilities need. We could make the system a lot more efficient if we invested in these things."

Colorado River Plan *continued from Page 1*

But if they follow the broad assumptions outlined in Reclamation's framework, our state could be forced to shoulder the heaviest burden for stabilizing the river beyond 2028.

"Arizona does not consent to annual reductions of up to 3 million acre-feet," state water director Tom Buschatzke wrote in a four-page letter to Reclamation.

There are "no potential futures" where users in Central Arizona Project's municipal and industrial pool would receive a normal water delivery through 2039, according to Reclamation's modeling.

Yuma irrigation districts with higher third-priority water rights are projected to fare better initially, receiving more than 80% of their appropriations in about half of those years.

But they also could face much deeper cuts starting in 2029 that could take more than 40% of Yuma farmland out of production.

Such a prospect could put some farms out of business, Reclamation notes, particularly if cuts persist for multiple years.

No one knows yet if that'll happen. But it could create cascading economic impacts if it does.

All Farmers Could Feel the Impact

This level of uncertainty doesn't just affect those with Colorado River contracts.

Water demand could change in unpredictable ways as central Arizona cities scramble to replace lost water.

That could produce ripple effects for groundwater-dependent farmers near urban areas and for those in the state's groundwater transportation basins, which were set aside decades ago for cities to tap.

Farmers are already feeling the pinch of lower prices for what they produce, coupled with increased fertilizer, fuel and labor costs.

Persistent domestic worker shortages are leaving produce in places like Yuma to rot on the vine.

Inconsistent water availability makes it even more difficult to plan for the new few years — much less for the next generation.

"This starts to change decisions," said Shawn Wood, Arizona Farm Bureau's first vice president whose family relies on groundwater and surface water to farm near fast-growing Buckeye.

"We may not see the impacts yet. But markets don't respond well to uncertainty, and neither does agriculture."

This is a rapidly developing story. Find the latest on the Colorado River — and the impact water cuts could have on Arizona agriculture — at azfb.org.

A Life Rooted in Service: Remembering Pinal County Farmer Oliver Anderson

By Julie Murphree,
Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Strategic Communications

Arizona agriculture has once again lost one of its quiet giants. Oliver Anderson, a lifelong Pinal County farmer, devoted husband to Hermina, proud parent of four children, and tireless volunteer whose service strengthened farming communities across the state, has passed away. His legacy is one of steady dedication, innovation on the land, and selfless leadership that helped shape both the fields of Maricopa and the organizations that advocate for those who work them.

Mr. Anderson was one of my 4-H leaders, and I can forever remember him running to his next volunteer assignment with notebooks, binders and a jumble of paper under his arms for his next meeting. His hands were creased with years of working on old tractors, never needing to buy new ones as the old and reliable could always be fixed.

If you met him in his office, it was hard to find a place to sit with books, papers and unopened mail scattered everywhere. But he knew exactly what was where.

He always had a smile, a kiss and a hug for you. He was as much Mr. Optimism as Mr. Anderson. It was his outlook that made you excited about the future. It was contagious.

The Early Years

Born and raised in Phoenix, Anderson earned a Bachelor of Science in Horticulture from the University of Arizona in 1952. After serving in the U.S. Air Force, he returned to Arizona with a clear purpose: to join the family's agricultural enterprise. In 1954 he began managing Anderson-Palmisano Farm in Maricopa—land his father Clinton had purchased with partner Joseph Palmisano in 1949. What started as a traditional operation raising cattle, cotton, grain, and alfalfa evolved under Anderson's guidance into a true multi-generational family farm. Over the decades it transformed into a value-added specialty operation producing dried wheat, grasses, flowers, and related products that reached national retailers such as Hobby Lobby, Pottery Barn, and Michaels through a long partnership with Knud Nielsen Company. Day-to-day management eventually passed to his son Kelly.

Anderson often said what he loved most about farming was the new challenge each day brought and the privilege of working so close to creation. That sense of purpose extended far beyond the farm gate. He served with distinction on the boards of the Arizona Farm Bureau and Pinal County Farm Bureau, Maricopa Rotary Club, the Maricopa Growers Gin Board, the Arizona Cotton Growers Association, the Arizona 4-H Youth Foundation, the Pinal County Fair and Parks Advisory Board, Pinal County NRCS, the Pinal County Extension Advisory Board, and the Pinal County Groundwater Advisory Council. He was a founding influence in the University of Arizona Maricopa Agricultural Center's advisory efforts and contributed decades of insight on water and natural-resource issues critical to Pinal County agriculture.

Oliver and Hermina Anderson loved to dance, staying out on the dance floor long after even the young couples walked back to their tables.

A Commitment to the Next Generation

His commitment to the next generation was especially profound. A longtime 4-H leader, Anderson helped establish and sustain the Arizona 4-H Youth Foundation, serving more than 14 years as a trustee and two terms as its president. The Anderson family provided the support that made the Arizona 4-H Historical Museum possible; it opened during National 4-H Week in 2004. In recognition of this work, he was inducted into the National 4-H Hall of Fame in 2006 and earlier received a Lifetime Award from the University of Arizona for his contributions to agriculture, community, and youth.

In 2009, Arizona Farm Bureau honored Oliver and Hermina with its Distinguished Service to Agriculture Award. The recognition captured what so many already knew: their contributions to the industry were extensive and deeply appreciated. Anderson himself explained why he remained a Farm Bureau member: "We need highly educated and highly trained representatives—Farm Bureau leaders—to speak for agriculture at the state and national level. I feel that Farm Bureau provides this service on a basis that's not comparable anywhere else."

Those who knew him best describe a man who served without fanfare. His son Kelly once observed that Anderson "always served under the radar, wanting no recognition—just wanting the pure joy and knowledge that things will be better." That quiet steadiness also shaped Maricopa itself. Anderson served on the Maricopa School Board for a decade, helped launch community efforts such as Stagecoach Days to fund the local swimming pool where Maricopa kids learned to swim, and supported countless civic initiatives alongside Hermina, who shared his spirit of service through music, education, the library, the historical society, and the school board.

Together Oliver and Hermina raised four children—Kelly, Troy, Lynn, and Wendy—all born, like their parents, at Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix, a detail Anderson proudly noted as proof of their deep Arizona roots. The family's story is one of continuity: land stewarded across generations, leadership passed forward, and a community strengthened by people who chose to stay and build.

Anderson's own words still ring true: "The good old days are today. There are always new challenges and what we've already contributed stands; we've done what we could in the past to make today better; but we'll always have new challenges to work out to help guide us into the future."

Arizona Farm Bureau, the farmers and ranchers of Pinal County, and the broader agricultural community are grateful for Oliver Anderson's decades of volunteer service, his innovative farming, and the example he set. His life reminds us that the strongest roots are those planted in service to others and to the land. We honor his memory by continuing the work he so faithfully advanced.

Drawn primarily from the Arizona Farm Bureau's 2015 profile of the Anderson family, contemporary accounts of his community contributions and the author's own memories of Mr. Anderson.

Arizona High Court Delivers Tax Fairness *continued from Page 1*

izona Supreme Court vacated the Court of Appeals' opinion but reinstated the Tax Court's judgment, delivering a clear statewide clarification.

12 Growers Representing Approximately 17,000 Acres of Permanent Crops

Richard Searle, a second-generation Arizona rancher and agricultural Orchard producer based in Cochise County, was part of the group of owners fighting the tax. "Our group was made up of 12 different growers representing approximately 17,000 acres of permanent crops in Cochise County," explains Searle. "As a group we coalesced around six or seven of us that originally met with our Assessor, Phillip Leiendecker, to try and explain how onerous and unfair his proposal was. When he basically blew us off, we decided to hire Paul Mooney to help represent us. As we all had the same issue, it seemed to make sense to work together as opposed to going at it individually. As the appeal went forward, we had several growers that weren't named in the appeal join us to help spread the overall costs of the appeal."

Searle pointed out that one farmer trying to fight this on their own would have been impossible because of legal fees. "The average farmer can't fight things like this alone; fighting together meant it could be done."

High Court's Core Holding is Unambiguous

Said the Court: "We conclude that permanent crops qualifying as agricultural property under A.R.S. § 42-12151 are valued under the income approach prescribed by § 42-13101 and may not be separately valued using standard appraisal methods and techniques under A.R.S. § 42-11001(6)."

In practical terms, once land qualifies as agricultural because it contains an aggregate of ten or more gross acres of permanent crops, the entire taxable unit—soil plus trees or vines—is valued solely by capitalizing average annual net cash rental of comparable agricultural property, without regard to urban or market influences. Assessors may not peel off the permanent crops, assign them independent market values, and stack those figures on top of the income-based land value. Doing so, the court noted, would reintroduce precisely the market pressures the Arizona Legislature barred and would risk the double taxation that Title 42 expressly forbids.

Adds Searle, "It's hard to forecast what would have happened without this win, but it wasn't unreasonable to expect our property taxes to exceed any likely profit our farms and orchards might have had, especially considering that most tree crops are alternate bearing. With alternate bearing years, some on, some off, there isn't a consistent income stream to count on. Also, as all crops are subject to market and weather risks, there are no income guarantees in agriculture."

The decision also nullifies the relevant portions of the Arizona Department of Revenue's Agricultural Property Manual that directed assessors to treat permanent crops as separately valued improvements. Administrative guidance cannot override the statutory scheme the Legislature enacted.

The Court held that although the Arizona Department of Revenue has authority to issue manuals and guidance implementing the tax statutes, administrative guidance cannot alter or expand the valuation methods established by the Legislature. Accordingly, the Court ruled that the Department's Agricultural Property Manual is unenforceable to the extent it requires assessors to separately assign market values to permanent crops in addition to valuing qualifying agricultural property under the statutory income approach. The higher Court affirmed the tax court's judgment. Although the Court agreed with the court of appeals' ultimate decision, it vacated that opinion and replaced it with its own reasoning.

Relieved and Vindicated

"Of course, we felt relieved and vindicated that our original position was correct," explains Searle. "It was obvious to us in the beginning that the county wasn't following State Statute and that their only justification was the Arizona Department of Revenue Manual, which we also knew wasn't law. There was group consensus among us that it wasn't fair to tax some crops and not tax others. Agricultural land is agricultural land regardless of the crops being grown. Plus, there are more permanent crops in Arizona besides nut trees and vines, and if the Assessor's position had held, all of those could have been subject to the whims and fancy of an assessor trying to make a name for themselves."

For Arizona's farmers and ranchers who rely on orchards, vineyards, or other permanent plantings, the ruling restores uniformity and predictability tied to state law. Property taxes will track the income-producing capacity of the agricultural enterprise rather than speculative market prices for the trees themselves. The practical effect is a fairer, more stable tax base that treats permanent-crop operations consistently with the current-use policy the Arizona Legislature has long applied to agricultural land.

"As growers trying to fight an obvious unfair and punitive tax increase, we were very appreciative of the industry groups that helped support our cause," says Searle. "Both Arizona Farm Bureau and Cochise County Farm & Ranch Bureau contributed to our legal expenses along with AMS Insurance and the Arizona Pecan Growers. Our biggest supporter was the American Pistachio Growers Association which contributed close to $45,000 towards our legal expenses which, after 3 years of appeals ended up well over $250,000. State Statute does allow us to recover some of our legal expenses from the county and state, but due to legal limitations we won't be able to fully recover all our costs. We should also get reimbursed from the county any of the tax increases that were not justified."

Farmers often say that the assessment appeal process in Arizona is not user friendly, so experienced counsel became very helpful in this situation. "It is obvious that both County Assessor's and the State Department of Revenue are not always correct and ultimately the only way to hold them accountable is to go through the appeal process," adds Searle.

Desert-Born Brilliance: The Surprising Secrets Behind Arizona's Exceptional Wines

By Julie Murphree,
Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Strategic Communications

Certainly, there's more to Arizona wine than meets the eye, or the palate. Wine-grape harvesting began several weeks ago. So, it's appropriate to speak about our wine industry.

And if I want to really show my bias, I might simply say Arizona wines are special because they are made in Arizona! Bias or not, Arizona wine is amazing. What began as an unlikely experiment in a farming landscape better known for cotton, wheat and alfalfa has matured into a vibrant industry producing distinctive, high-quality bottles that increasingly earn national and international recognition.

The modern Arizona wine story traces its commercial roots to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when soil scientist Dr. Gordon Dutt recognized that certain Arizona soils shared characteristics with those of Burgundy and other classic European regions. Today the state boasts three American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) — Sonoita (established 1984), Willcox (2016), and Verde Valley (2021) — more than 130 wineries, and a rapidly expanding footprint of vineyards planted primarily at elevations between roughly 3,500 and 5,500 feet. Willcox alone accounts for most the state's grape production. Growth has been remarkable: the number of producers roughly tripled in a little over a decade, and the industry now generates billions in economic activity while supporting thousands of jobs.

The Numbers Tell the Story

Reported earlier in Arizona Agriculture, the wine industry's latest report from the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension offers the clearest picture yet of Arizona's commercial wine grape industry. According to the 2025 Arizona Wine Grape Harvest Report, growers managed approximately 703.5 acres of wine grapes statewide, of which 532.2 acres were harvested. Those vines produced a total of about 1,187 tons of fruit. Of that crop, roughly 722 tons stayed with the growers for their own winemaking, while 417 tons were sold to other producers. Data came from 67 vineyard operations believed to represent about 90 percent of the state's commercial plantings.

Overall, according to the Arizona Wine Growers Association, the industry contributes an average of $1.2 billion in the baseline wine grape growing and the value-added product to the industry.

The industry's diversity stood out as a major finding. Growers reported 76 distinct grape varieties, with reds accounting for roughly 71% of planted acres and whites the remaining 29%. Syrah led the state in acreage, followed by Grenache and Cabernet Sauvignon. Just six varieties — Syrah, Grenache, Cabernet Sauvignon, Viognier, Malvasia Bianca, and Chardonnay — made up half of all harvested acreage, while numerous niche and Italian varieties thrived in smaller plantings, especially in the Verde Valley.

Says Emil Molin, founder, owner, and executive winemaker of Cove Mesa Vineyard in Arizona's stunning Verde Valley AVA, "It's kind of shocking the wonderful and robust variety of grapes we can grow in Arizona. Only a few don't do well here." Molin was featured during one of Arizona Farm Bureau's Fill Your Plate Now podcast episodes.

Regionally, the Willcox area remained the clear production leader by both acreage and tonnage. Surprisingly, the second-largest concentration of vineyards sat outside the three formal American Viticultural Areas, with most of that non-AVA acreage also located in Cochise County. Verde Valley and Sonoita contributed smaller but meaningful shares. Fruit use also varied: Verde Valley producers retained more than 90 percent of their harvest for estate wines, while Cochise County growers supplied the bulk of grapes sold on the open market.

Pricing data further underscored the value of Arizona-grown fruit. Grapes sold in 2025 averaged a weighted $2,404.54 per ton, with individual prices ranging from $900 to $3,920 depending on variety, quality, and location. Together, these figures provide a solid baseline that growers, marketers, and researchers can use to track the industry's continued growth and evolution.

While these numbers show an impressive wine industry landscape in Arizona, pain in the market exists. Demand, especially among young people, has waned. And the market across the United States is saturated with available wine.

Yet numbers alone do not explain the character in the glass. The berries produced in Arizona's unforgiving high-desert climate, when carefully vinified and aged, can yield world-class vintages that are unique, dense in flavor, and age-worthy. Winemakers emphasize that some of these growing conditions exist elsewhere, but the combination found here qualifies Arizona as a wine region that aficionados can and should celebrate. CEO Mark Beres of Flying Leap Vineyards and Distillery has pointed to three core reasons that help Arizona grapes achieve concentrated quality. Those remain foundational. Building on them reveals additional Arizona-specific advantages rooted in elevation, soils, weather patterns, and the varieties that thrive here.

A little Stress Never Hurt Any Grape

Great wine often comes from vines that have struggled. In Arizona's arid environment, limited water, intense sun, and rocky or well-drained soils force vines to dig deep and focus energy on fewer, more intensely flavored berries rather than lush vegetative growth. When vines experience controlled stress, the fruit develops enhanced concentrated flavors and aromas. This is not unique to Arizona, but the desert amplifies it. Growers manage drip irrigation carefully, balancing hardship with survival so that the resulting wines show density and complexity rather than thinness or green notes. Recent harvests have sometimes been smaller due to delayed monsoons or extreme heat, yet the silver lining is often extraordinary concentration—precisely the outcome stressed vines can deliver.

Arizona's Wine Country Enjoys Favorable Temperature Extremes Known as Diurnal Shift

The temperature range within a 24-hour period can swing dramatically—often 30 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit or more, and in some accounts among the most pronounced diurnal ranges on the planet after Mendoza, Argentina. Warm, sunny days allow sugars and "phenolic compounds" to accumulate fully. Cool nights slow respiration, preserving natural acidity and aromatic compounds that might otherwise burn

See **Desert-Born Brilliance** Page 7

Desert-Born Brilliance: *continued from Page 6*

off in constant heat. The result is balance: ripe fruit flavors paired with freshness and structure that keep the wines lively and food-friendly rather than heavy or flabby. This day-night contrast is a defining climatic gift across Arizona's higher elevations.

Arizona Winemaker Eric Glomski of Page Springs Cellars is often quoted saying, "We have extreme diurnal shifts from 95 to 50 degrees. We get nice sugar production… The cold nights give us acid retention, so we get rich but balanced wines."

Especially in Southern Arizona, Grapes Enjoy a Long Growing Season

Arizona's southern latitude affords an extended period of warmth and sunlight. Vines can bud relatively early and continue ripening well into fall or even later in favorable years, giving fruit extended "hang time." Longer hang time translates into more nuanced flavor development, deeper color, richer aromas, and often higher natural sugar levels that produce wines with elevated alcohol and bolder profiles. Compared with cooler, more northerly regions, the season here is substantially longer, allowing full physiological maturity while the diurnal shifts protect acidity. This combination supports both powerful reds and expressive whites.

These three factors form a strong foundation, but Arizona offers additional, distinctly local advantages that further shape its wines.

Other Advantages

High elevation is one of the state's defining assets. Most vineyards sit well above the hottest desert floors, typically between 3,500 and 5,500 feet, with some sites higher still. Elevation intensifies the diurnal swing already described and increases ultraviolet exposure. According to our wine experts and the University of Arizona, higher UV levels encourage thicker grape skins, which contribute color, tannin structure, and flavor concentration. The combination of altitude, clear desert air, and abundant sunshine creates intense light that drives ripening while the nights provide necessary recovery. The surrounding mountain ranges further moderate conditions by channeling winds and creating microclimates.

During one of Arizona Farm Bureau's "Talk to a Farmer Friday" guest and winemaker Kent Callaghan of Callaghan Vineyards explained, "Our wines are not fruit centered. The fruit is in the back. You can feel it in the mouth. It's more concentrated. There's more guts."

REGISTER BY November 6TH

3 WAYS TO REGISTER!

BY PHONE
(480) 635-3605

BY E-MAIL
convention@azfb.org

BY MAIL
Arizona Farm Bureau
325 S. Higley Rd., Ste 210
Gilbert, AZ 85296-4770

HOTEL RESERVATION INFORMATION

Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa
3800 E Sunrise Dr.,
Tucson, AZ 85718

Reserve by **OCT. 26, 2026**

Please call (520) 742-6000 and mention
Group code: Z F A
our rate $229/night, plus tax.

Attendee Name(s):

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____

Arizona Farm Bureau

105th ANNUAL CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

November 16-17, 2026 • Westin La Paloma

Celebrating Our Heritage Growing Our Future

Registration Fee $185 per person (pricing includes all meals)
Do Not Delay - Registration Deadline November 6th - Register Today!

Farm Bureau members throughout Arizona will set policy, hear informational and political speakers, attend awards and recognition events and the Ag Expo Trade Show. Don't miss out on the opportunity to network with other members!

Name ________________ Membership # __________

Address ________________________

City, State and Zip Code ________________

Phone #__________ E-Mail ______________

Credit Card # ____________________

Exp Date______ CVV______ Signature____________

☐ Attend U of A Breakout Sessions (Monday 8am - 4pm) .... #ppl______
Please select this option if you are interested in attending sessions on ARID, AgTech, Livestock & Grazing and Farm Business & Management, etc. (SEE ARTICLE PAGE 8)

PLEASE INDICATE WHICH MEALS YOU WILL BE ATTENDING!

☐ Service to Ag Awards Dinner - Monday Evening .... #ppl______

☐ AgPac Breakfast - Tuesday Morning .... #ppl______

☐ President's Luncheon - Tuesday Noon .... #ppl______

☐ **Registration Fee Per Person** .... **$185.00 x ______ = ______**

When Arizona Farm Bureau Leaders Answer the Call, We Step Up

By Arizona Farm Bureau AgPAC

Arizona agriculture is strongest when those who understand its challenges best are willing to step forward and serve. That is why the AgPAC of Arizona Farm Bureau has endorsed Andy Biggs for Governor, Sine Kerr for Lieutenant Governor, and Warren Petersen for Attorney General.

For Arizona Farm Bureau, these endorsements are about more than individual campaigns. They are about supporting leaders who understand the importance of agriculture, rural Arizona and the policies that allow farmers and ranchers to continue producing food, fuel and fiber for our state and nation.

Sine Kerr knows agriculture firsthand. A fourth-generation dairy farmer from Buckeye, Kerr has spent her career working on behalf of Arizona agriculture, as a producer, Farm Bureau leader, state legislator and most recently as Arizona's USDA Farm Service Agency executive director. Her selection as Andy Biggs' running mate brings a strong agricultural and rural voice to the gubernatorial ticket.

The AgPAC has also endorsed **Andy Biggs** for Governor. As Arizona faces significant challenges surrounding water, agriculture, land management, regulation and the state's overall business climate, having leaders who recognize the importance of a strong agricultural economy will be critical to our industry's future.

In the Attorney General's race, AgPAC has endorsed **Warren Petersen**. As President of the Arizona Senate, Petersen has worked on many of the issues important to Arizona agriculture and has demonstrated a willingness to defend Arizona's interests and challenge federal overreach. His experience in the Legislature and understanding of Arizona policy make him a strong candidate to serve as the state's next Attorney General.

Endorsements Are Only the First Step

Now, we are asking our members to answer the call as well.

Arizona Farm Bureau's strength has always come from member engagement, whether it is contributing to AgPAC, attending a candidate event, making a phone call, knocking on a door or simply having a conversation with a neighbor. The 2026 election will have lasting consequences for Arizona agriculture.

Help the AgPAC of Arizona Farm Bureau elect strong leaders, donate to the PAC by visiting our website https://www.azfb.org/Advocacy/AgPAC.

Join Us at the Inaugural AgXArizona Summit

Arizona Farm Bureau delegate members attending the Annual Meeting in Tucson November 16–17 at the Westin La Paloma are invited to kick off the gathering with the inaugural AgXArizona Summit on Monday, November 16. This full-day event brings together industry leaders, researchers, students, and policy-makers to explore what's next for Arizona agriculture through workshops, plenary sessions, and open dialogue.

Be Part of the Nine Grand Challenges

The Summit is organized around nine "Grand Challenge" sessions. Each pairs expert speakers with panel discussion and audience Q&A, creating practical conversations that connect research innovation with real-world impact for Arizona producers. Speakers come from academia (University of Arizona, Arizona State University, and Northern Arizona University), government (including USDA-ALARC), industry, and philanthropy.

The Nine Grand Challenge Sessions

- **Soil Health — From Data to Dirt: Advancing AgTech Solutions for Regenerative Soil Health in Arid-Land Agriculture**
  How sensing, AI-guided irrigation, and rapid diagnostics can sustain and regenerate soil in arid-land farming. Moderated by Joey Blankinship (UA).
- **Precision Livestock Production**
  Integrating smart sensors, data analytics, and AI to improve efficiency and resource management in livestock operations. Moderated by Flavie Audoin (UA).
- **Animal Health & Biosecurity**
  Strategies to protect the future of Arizona's ranching and livestock industries. Moderated by Amy Ganguli (UA).
- **Integrated Pest Management**
  New tools and strategies to protect Arizona crops from emerging pests and diseases (CEUs available).
- **Water-Resilient AgTech**
  Identifying technologies that are functional, operationally compatible, and economically viable for Arizona's water future. Moderated by Sharon Megdal (UA) and Erica Martin (ASU).
- **Business, Policy & Energy Resilience**
  Building a resilient agricultural ecosystem through strong business management and policy engagement amid shifting energy and data demands. Includes a session on data center/AI infrastructure and a panel on solar and energy leasing. Moderated by Phil Bashaw (Arizona Farm Bureau).
- **Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA)**
  Scaling CEA as a next-generation solution for water-resilient production. Moderated by Murat Kacira (UA).
- **Digital & AI-Driven Farming**
  How connectivity, precision tech, and AI can modernize Arizona agriculture and help farmers transition to new tools. Moderated by Tyler Smith (ASU) and Connor Osgood (UA).
- **Next-Gen Plant Breeding**
  Accelerating breeding technologies to grow more with less water in arid lands. Moderated by Duke Pauli (UA).

Whether you raise livestock, grow crops, manage water resources, or navigate policy and energy issues, these sessions offer timely insights and networking opportunities tailored to Arizona's unique challenges and opportunities.

Mark your calendar for November 16 at the Westin La Paloma and plan to be part of this important conversation about the future of Arizona agriculture. We look forward to seeing Arizona Farm Bureau members there as we explore practical, forward-looking solutions together.

For more details, contact Katie Booth at 480.635.3605 or email at katiebooth@azfb.org. The nearby registration form provides an ability for you to sign up for this year's event.

Details are on azfb.org.