



Arizona Agriculture

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ARIZONA FARM BUREAU

www.azfb.org

October 2026

Volume 79 | No. 8

Water Deal Could Upend the Narrative About Agriculture

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Manager

Central Arizona Irrigation and Drainage District (CAIDD) is formally considering a deal to import water from California.

Take a second to let that sink in — because it's counter to what most folks think about agriculture.

The assumption has long been that water aug-



Water flows to fields in Pinal County. Photo by AZFB

mentation is only for major cities, those that can pay the higher cost that new water sources require.

But farmers are leading the way on this conversation.

And that could impact a lot more than the Pinal County fields they irrigate.

CAIDD Lost Water Years Ago

CAIDD already knows the deep pain of Colorado River cuts.

It was among the first to see its lower-priority water eliminated in the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan.

The Eloy irrigation district secured state and federal aid to resume pumping groundwater, but those wells only produce a fraction of the water that the

Central Arizona Project once delivered.

In a gravity-fed system like CAIDD's, less water in canals means less momentum to push water to every customer.

"Some laterals are better than others," said district president Dan Shedd, who irrigated 2,200 acres when Colorado River water was still flowing.

That's down to about 600 acres now.

"My neighbor can't farm as much as I can because of where the wells are situated. Most of us are less than 50%."

Farms Need Extra in Summer

Farmers across the district have adapted to this new reality. Most have fallowed land. Some have sold or leased parcels to solar projects to help make ends meet.

Many remaining fields have been reconfigured into smaller plots, so lower-pressure water can move uniformly across them.

And farmers are diversifying what they grow. "Normally, I'd have 1,600 acres in cotton," Shedd, an Arizona Farm Bureau member, said.

"But now I'm growing wheat and garbanzo beans in the winter when there's more water. It's just a break-even deal."

Summer is a different story.

Though more profitable alfalfa, cotton, corn and Bermuda grass can be grown then, it can be a struggle to pump enough water when the heat's on and everyone needs irrigation at once.

In past years, the irrigation district has secured extra supplies from nearby providers to supplement when needs are highest.

But that water is growing scarce as others across Arizona now face cuts. CAIDD knows it needs to do more.

Cadiz Has Groundwater to Sell

Meanwhile, a California water and land management company called Cadiz is looking for interested parties to sell its groundwater, which it says would

otherwise be lost to evaporation in a dry lakebed.

Cadiz has secured rights to pump up to 75,000 acre-feet of water a year from an aquifer roughly the size of Lake Mead.

Its Mojave Groundwater Bank, located about two hours west of Lake Havasu City in Arizona, is neither new nor universally welcomed in California.

Opponents have tried to stop the project multiple times over 30 years.

But Cadiz recently secured the last federal permit it needs to begin converting a natural gas line to transport its water north and west.

The idea, at least initially, is to exchange that water with users who receive supplies from the State Water Project.

That water would flow to Los Angeles, in an agreement that has yet to be cemented, where users there would agree to conserve a commensurate amount of Colorado River water.

And then, in other agreements that still must be negotiated, 10,000 acre-feet of that water would flow to CAIDD through the Central Arizona Project canal.

Effort Now is to Lower the Price

If this sounds complicated, it is.

Finalizing complex agreements to move water every year for at least five decades is one thing.

Lowering the price for CAIDD to officially bite on this deal is another.

"We can't pass the cost onto food," Cadiz CEO Susan Kennedy said, particularly when farmers already operate on slim margins.

Kennedy — a long-time California political operative — is rustling the bushes for private investment and an 80% federal funding match.

She is also working with the Bureau of Reclamation to develop a model exchange agreement that could be used to expedite other interstate water transfers.

This Could Change the Narrative

Ten thousand acre-feet is a

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A Freight Train Called November

By Daniel Harris,
Arizona Farm Bureau Government Relations Manager

A freight train called November is coming, and nothing will slow it down. Election Day arrives on schedule whether voters are ready or not. Campaigns cannot delay it, polls cannot reroute it, and no amount of money buys an extra day. What voters do control is where the train goes once it leaves the station. The people who cast ballots set its course, and the officials it carries will decide water, tax, labor, and farm policy for years to come.

How Midterms Work

Midterms are not a replay of the last presidential race. They follow their own pattern: turnout falls, down-ballot races get more expensive, and the president's party usually loses ground in Congress. That pattern is the best way to read Arizona's ballot this year.

Nationally, 2026 looks like a typical second-year midterm. The president's approval rating sits about where it usually does at this point in a term. On the generic ballot, the poll question asking whether voters plan to support a Republican or a Democrat for Congress, Democrats have held the lead. Republicans are defending a House majority of only a few seats, and narrow

majorities are hard to hold in a midterm. Since the 1950s, the president's party has lost House seats in every midterm but two: 1998 and 2002.

Arizona's Unusual Ballot

For the first time since 2014, Arizona has no U.S. Senate race. Senator Mark Kelly is not up until 2028, and Senator Ruben Gallego not until 2030. That does not shrink the election. It turns up the volume on everything else. Money and staff that would have gone to a Senate race are flowing instead to the governor's race, the attorney general's race, two competitive U.S. House seats, and a Legislature where a handful of flips could change control.

The governor's race is also a first. Proposition 131, passed by voters in 2022, created the office of lieutenant governor. Starting this year, candidates for governor and lieutenant governor run as a ticket. The winners take office January 4, 2027. From then on, if the governor's office becomes vacant, the lieutenant governor steps in. Until now, that job went to the secretary of state, even one from the opposing party.

The Ninth Floor

The new running-mate slot puts agriculture on a statewide ticket in a way that has not been seen in Arizona in a couple of ways. The first is the Lieutenant Governor. The second, and more impactful is that that newly created office could be held by a Farmer, former State Senator Sine Kerr. Gov.

Katie Hobbs is running with former Mesa Mayor John Giles. Andy Biggs chose Sine Kerr, whose family ran a dairy in the West Valley. Kerr chaired the Senate Natural Resources Committee and served as state director of USDA's Farm Service Agency. Whoever wins, Arizona will seat its first lieutenant governor. If it is Kerr, a working farmer will hold a seat in the governor's office for the first time in Arizona history. The strategy behind the pick is to pair a nationally known conservative with a name rural Arizo-

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Meet Your New CALES Dean

By Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Team

If you ask George W. Smith where his work starts, he won't begin with titles. He'll start on a livestock farm in Idaho. That's where he first saw what agriculture does for families, towns, and the people who depend on both.



On August 1, 2026, Smith became Charles-Sander Dean of the University of Arizona College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences (CALES). His charge is straightforward and familiar to anyone in Arizona agriculture: strengthen the college's impact across the state by building partnerships, pushing useful and applicable innovation, and putting research to work on the hard problems—water, land, food systems, communities, and public health.

He comes to Tucson from Michigan State University, where he served as senior associate dean for research in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources and director of AgBioResearch, the state's agricultural experiment station. That job meant steering a research enterprise of more than 300 scientists across seven colleges, a budget north of \$140 million, and a statewide network of facilities.

Smith is a builder of coalitions. He helped launch the Michigan Alliance for Animal Agriculture with industry and the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. He helped lock in state dollars for agricultural resilience and new research space, and he cultivated private support that brought in more than \$13 million for research and innovation.

Nationally, he chaired agInnovation, the organization representing the country's state experiment stations, and used that seat to keep the conversation on climate resilience, water, sustainable food systems, and the next generation of the workforce. The through-line of his career is simple: universities, agencies, industry, and producers must sit at the same table if research is going to matter on the ground.

Before the big administrative roles, he was a scientist. Smith joined Michigan State in 1997 as an assistant professor of animal science. An internationally recognized reproductive physiologist, he spent his lab years studying ovarian function, oocyte quality, and early embryonic development in cattle. That work advanced livestock reproduction and offered insights that travel into human medicine. He has more than 140 peer-reviewed papers.

The degrees followed the farm: animal science at the University of Idaho, then a master's and doctorate in animal science at the University of Missouri.

Arizona's land-grant college has a dean who grew up knowing that research only counts if it helps the people who raise the cattle, grow the crops, and keep a community standing. That's the conversation Smith says he's here to continue.

Arizona Agriculture: You grew up on a livestock farm in Idaho and focused your research on dairy cattle production. How will those experiences shape how you lead CALES?

Smith: Growing up on a farm in Idaho, I lived the realities of agriculture long before I ever studied them. I know what it means to depend on the weather, make decisions with incomplete information, and wonder whether the economics are going to work.

That experience never left me. It gave me a deep appreciation for the people who take those risks ev-

ery day, and it shapes how I think about the land-grant mission.

I came to Arizona with a pretty good understanding of the questions that matter to producers, but I also know I have a lot to learn about this state. My job is to listen, bring the incredible expertise of CALES together, and make sure we're working on problems that matter.

I think living it changes the questions you ask. What problem are we trying to solve? What will it take to solve it? Are we listening to the people closest to the problem? Are we putting our expertise where it can have the greatest impact?

That lived experience makes a difference.

Arizona Agriculture: What is Arizona's greatest water challenge? How can the college and cooperative extension help solve it?

Smith: I'm still new enough to Arizona to approach this question with some humility. But it's clear that water is fundamental to Arizona's future, and agriculture is going to be a big part of that conversation.

The challenge isn't simply having less water. It's figuring out how to keep agriculture productive and profitable as water becomes more constrained, while also dealing with water quality, salinity and extreme heat.

That's why I'm excited about the direction CALES is taking. We've secured six strategic faculty positions that bring together water economics, irrigation, engineering, soil science, crop science, nutrition, robotics, and plant physiology. Now it's about attracting the best people and giving them the tools to do their best work. It's a new team for a new reality.

These scientists will come at the challenge from different directions, but they're connected by the same goal: helping Arizona agriculture remain productive, profitable and resilient.

And then we must get the science into the field. That's where Cooperative Extension is so important, connecting researchers with producers and turning knowledge into solutions people can actually use.

Arizona has a very real water challenge. But I also see an opportunity for CALES to lead, not just here but in other arid regions around the world.

Arizona Agriculture: Arizona is dealing with a slew of emerging pests and diseases, including the New World Screwworm and avian flu. What are the risks to livestock producers, and how is CALES working to minimize them?

Smith: These are serious threats because they can move quickly and have real consequences for producers.

The New world screwworm is a good example. According to

work from our Cooperative Extension economist, the estimated cost to a producer is about \$437 per case when you account for animal losses, lower weights, monitoring and treatment. If just 1% of Arizona's cattle and calves were affected, that could mean roughly \$4.4 million in additional costs and losses for producers annually.

That's why preparedness matters.

CALES and Cooperative Extension are working with producers, veterinarians and state and federal partners on education, preparedness and response planning. The University of Arizona also secured a \$3.74 million USDA grant to strengthen screwworm research, surveillance, education and outreach.

And Extension helped make the case for a sterile-fly dispersal facility in Douglas. USDA has now committed up to \$25 million toward that facility, which could become an important tool for protecting Arizona and the broader region.

We're taking the same preparedness approach with threats like avian flu; helping producers understand biosecurity, recognize signs of disease and know where to turn.

We can't eliminate every threat, but we can be ready to detect it earlier, respond faster and give producers the tools they need. That's what CALES is doing.

Arizona Agriculture: How will you balance high-level climate and environmental science with the day-to-day needs

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ARIZONA AGRICULTURE (ISSN 0274-7014) is published 9 times a year by Arizona Farm Bureau, 325 S. Higley Rd., Ste. 210, Gilbert, AZ 85296. Periodicals postage paid at Gilbert, AZ and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to:
Arizona Agriculture
325 S. Higley Rd., Ste. 210
Gilbert, Arizona 85296

Subscriptions are included in annual dues.



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Douglas Port Transforms Cattle Importing Process

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic Communications Manager

This is not your father’s border cattle crossing.



A quarantine zone separates newly arrived cattle in Agua Prieta, Mexico, from those that have undergone their first round of health inspections. Photo by Joanna Allhands/AZFB



Inspectors from SENASICA — the Mexican agency that oversees livestock health — examine cattle. Those that don’t make the cut are marked with paint, sorted into separate pens and transported out of the facility within 24 hours. Photo by Joanna Allhands/AZFB

The facility that straddles Douglas, Ariz., and Agua Prieta, Mexico, has been reconfigured to move cattle more quickly, with multiple health inspections and an electronic record of every place they’ve been that’s available to buyers and sellers in real time. “It really is unprecedented, what we’re doing here,” said Arizona Department of Agriculture Animal Services Division Director Rob Smook, who has embedded state inspectors at the site.

The Douglas facility was the first of the Mexican border ports to reopen to cattle imports in late August after concerns about New World Screwworm closed them all in May 2025.



Veterinarians from USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service further inspect cattle and check their health records. Photo by R. Anson Eaglin/USDA

Only cattle born and raised in the Mexican state of Sonora are accepted at the facility. A certified veterinarian must inspect them days before leaving their point of origin, and each steer or heifer is outfitted with an electronic ear tag that contains this paperwork.



Specially trained dogs sniff cattle for New World Screwworm. Its maggots give off a telltale smell. Photo by R. Anson Eaglin/USDA



Cattle that pass inspections in Agua Prieta are fully dipped in an insecticide before moving across the border. Photo by Juan Carlos Villalobos/UGRS

Hundreds of cattle arrive in Agua Prieta each day — none, so far, with screwworms.

Officials credit layers of protective measures, including a quick turnaround at the facility, multiple rounds of health inspections and, for the first time, a completely traceable electronic health record on their ear.



Electronic ear tags are scanned and paperwork updated so cattle can be fully traced from their point of origin. Photo by Joanna Allhands/AZFB



Cattle are funneled through a gate in the border wall to the Douglas, Ariz., side of the facility. Photo by Joanna Allhands/AZFB



Cattle are loaded into trailers after they are inspected, treated and cleared, bound for states such as Texas and Oklahoma. Photo by Lance Cheung/USDA



WANT TO SEE MORE?

Take a video tour of the Douglas cattle importation facility at www.azfb.org.

New CALES Dean

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of commercial producers?

Smith: I don't see those things as mutually exclusive.

CALES was founded in agriculture, and that remains at the heart of who we are. But our roots have grown into so many disciplines: soil science, environmental science, nutrition and human development, economics and engineering. All of them have a connection to how we produce food, sustain our communities and steward the resources we depend on.

Our job is to look ahead without losing sight of what's happening in the field today. We need scientists working the fundamental questions that will shape agriculture 10 or 20 years from now, while Extension and applied research are helping producers make decisions today.

The opportunity is to connect those things. That's where the land-grant mission is so powerful. We can do exceptional science, but we also have a responsibility to put that science to work for Arizona.

Arizona Agriculture: Arizona Farm Bureau, cattle groups and Western Growers were part of the dean search conversation. How will you keep them engaged in your work?

Smith: The first thing I want those organizations

to know is that I listened during the dean search, and I'm going to keep listening.

Arizona Farm Bureau, the cattle groups, Western Growers and others were part of that conversation for a reason. They understand what's happening on the ground, and CALES needs that perspective.

I want to double down on the land-grant mission. That means building relationships with producers and industry not just when we have finished a research project, but when we're deciding what questions we should be asking in the first place.

I'm going to spend a lot of time around the state listening to growers, ranchers, Extension people and communities. As I do, I'll share what I'm hearing through Ag100, podcasts, local and agricultural media and CALES.

We'll also begin a strategic planning process in 2027, and I want our partners to be a part of that conversation.

For me partnership isn't an event or a luncheon. It's a way of leading.

Arizona Agriculture: In 12 months, what should a farmer in Yuma or a rancher in Cochise County be able to point to and say, "That's better because Smith is dean."

Smith: I hope a farmer in Yuma or a rancher in Cochise County can say, "CALES is listening to us, and I know where to go when I need help."

I'll be spending much of my first year touring the state. Meeting growers, ranchers, Extension agents, faculty and communities, and listening to what they're telling us.

The University of Arizona has made water and arid/dryland agriculture a university-wide strategic priority. My job is to help turn that commitment into action for Arizona. That means building the team, strengthening partnerships and moving research and Extension closer to the people who can use it.

I want people to see us acting on what we hear. That could be a new research partnership, an Extension program, a better connection to a CALES expert or a new solution moving from the lab into the field.

I don't think the measure of my first year should be how many things have my name on them. It should be whether people believe CALES is more connected, more responsive and more focused on the challenges that matter to them.

If a producer can say, "They're listening. They're showing up. They're bringing science to the table," then I think we'll be off to a good start. 🚗

Freight Train

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na already knows. Whether that moves swing voters is an open question.

The Attorney General's Race

If the Ninth Floor sets the agenda, the attorney general decides how much of it holds up in court. Kris Mayes won the office in 2022 by 280 votes after a recount. She is seeking a second term against Senate President Warren Petersen.

For agriculture, this is not a side contest. The attorney general's office is where water cases, land-use disputes, and challenges to federal rules get filed or defended. Mayes has run the office as a Democrat alongside a Republican Legislature. Petersen is running as the alternative, promising to stop the attacks on ag by the current occupant. Last election, a few hundred votes decided who held this job in one of the closest races we have seen in modern politics. It deserves the same attention as the governor's race.

The Ciscomani Seat

Analysts now treat any U.S. House district Donald Trump carried by 10 points or less in 2024 as competitive, about 43 seats nationwide, however the control of the House is projected to come down to a handful of elections. In Arizona, the clearest example is the 6th Congressional District.

Rep. Juan Ciscomani holds a true toss-up seat running from Tucson's eastern and southern suburbs through Cochise, Graham, and Greenlee counties, where he has been able to support and advocate strongly for the agricultural community in his district. He won it by only a few points in 2022 and 2024, and Trump carried it by less than a point. His Democratic opponent, JoAnna Mendoza, is a Marine veteran, and one of the strongest fundraisers among Arizona's House candidates from out of state donors. With a

House majority this thin, a seat like this can decide which party runs the chamber.

The Legislative Battlegrounds

All 90 legislative seats are on the ballot. Democrats need to gain three Senate seats or four House seats to take control of a chamber, the same margins hold true for Republicans to maintain control of the legislature. The contests that matter most for agriculture run through rural Arizona.

LD-23 covers much of Yuma County and rural western Maricopa County. Its two House seats are already split between the parties, and both sides see the second seat as a pickup. LD-16 follows Interstate 10 through Pinal County, including Maricopa, Eloy, Coolidge, and Florence, and is represented in the Senate by President Pro Tem T.J. Shope, and Representatives Teresa Martinez and Chris Lopez, who flipped the seat in 2024 and now is trying to hold it. It includes some of the most productive farmland in the state. LD-17 covers the Oro Valley and Marana area, where Democrats flipped a House seat in 2024 and now must defend it.

Why Turnout Matters

Arizona has about 4.3 million registered voters. Republicans make up about 35 percent, Democrats about 28 percent, and independents and minor parties the rest.

Registration shows the shape of the electorate, but in a midterm, the outcome depends on how many of those voters take part.

Arizona's midterm turnout has varied widely: about 48 percent of registered voters in 2014, and in the 60s in 2018 and 2022. Arizona's July 21, 2026, statewide primary had unofficial turnout of roughly 25-27% of registered voters, the lowest rate for an Arizona primary since 2008.

The train is already moving. With early voting beginning on October 7th, the 85% of Arizonan's that vote either early in person (10%) or by mail (75%) will begin to cast their ballots. After November 3, it leaves the station and heads wherever the voters who turned out have sent it. Whoever holds the Ninth Floor, the attorney general's office, the Legislature, and the U.S. House will shape water, taxes, labor, and the farm safety net for years. Every farm and ranch in Arizona will be on board. The only question is who chooses the destination of a freight train called November. 🚂



Water Deal

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drop in the bucket for CAIDD, which even at diminished capacity delivered about 160,000 acre-feet last year.

It's not enough water to restore fields that have been taken out of production.

But it is enough to provide more long-term certainty for those that remain.

If the deal comes together, it could prove to other irrigation districts that new supplies aren't necessarily out of reach, and that agriculture has a more secure future in Arizona, despite its current water challenges.

And even if it doesn't, district leaders contend, the conversation could open doors to other ideas and opportunities.

"This could bring water to Arizona, whether or not we can utilize it," said Ron McEachern, CAIDD's former general manager. "That's worth something." 🚒

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Willcox Plan Shakes Up Arizona Groundwater Policy

By Joanna Allhands,
Arizona Farm Bureau Strategic
Communications Manager

Arizona is asking farmers in an over-drafted basin to absorb specific water cuts. That’s never been done before.

There is no easy or painless way to solve Willcox’s groundwater problems. At least 150,000 acre-feet more water flows out of the southeastern Arizona basin than flows into it each year, according to state estimates. This decline has accelerated since 1990, drying up wells, cracking the earth and permanently damaging the aquifer’s capacity to store water. To cut that figure in half — a goal the Department of Water Resources has proposed for the basin — farmers could be required to slash use by at least 75,000 acre-feet* by 2075. (Yes, the asterisk is on purpose. We’ll get to that.)

Groundwater Is All There Is

Willcox is among the nation’s largest producers of pecans and pistachios. It grows most of the state’s wine grapes, as well as alfalfa for local dairies and a smattering of other crops. Fields here average some of the highest irrigation efficiency rates in the state. But crops require steady water to grow. And groundwater is all there is. Mountain runoff doesn’t recharge the aquifer much, and there are no real prospects to recycle or import water. Not in the quantities necessary to meaningfully offset pumping, at least. Farmers know something must give. They can’t afford to deepen wells and remain economically viable forever. “Subsidence will crush a well casing like you stepping on an aluminum can,” said Tedd Haas, a Cochise County Farm Bureau board member who grows multiple crops on the northern end of the Willcox basin. “It’s expensive. And it happens unexpectedly, like a heart attack, usually in the middle of the season when we really need water.”

Water Cuts Require Careful Balance

Many like Haas say they are willing to cut water use, particularly if it can help sustain their operations for the next generation. But cutting water allotments too deeply could idle major chunks of land, upending a local economy that

depends on agriculture. This requires careful balance. Which brings us back to that asterisk. It’s unclear, for now, exactly how much water must be cut to meet Willcox’s proposed 50% overdraft reduction goal. Presuming the goal is adopted, reduction targets won’t be set until next year, after the state has collected more data to more confidently say how much water is being removed from the aquifer. But the Department of Water Resources doesn’t want to wait until later management plans to start trimming agricultural water use. A draft of the basin’s first management plan includes a 10% cut in water duties — the maximum amount of water that farmers can pump in a year — for nearly all crops, right out of the gate. That has never been done before.

Arizona Tries a New Approach

In Phoenix and Tucson, where the management goal is more stringent — essentially zero overdraft, as opposed to a 50% reduction in Willcox — water duties were not cut in the first management plan. Later plans focused heavily on efficiency gains for farmers, not straight cuts to their water allotments. But those urban basins had access to other water sources. And they experienced steady growth that replaced farms with houses, cutting agricultural water use over time. With those options effectively off the table in Willcox — and other overdrawn basins where agriculture drives nearly all water use — the department says it must take another tack. The proposed management goal for the Rane-gras Plain in western Arizona is similar to Willcox’s, though the state has only just begun work on its management plan. “We are trying to be very thoughtful, knowing that we’re asking people to do a very difficult thing,” said Olga Hart, who is overseeing the regulatory rollout in both basins. How Do We Get Water Duties Right? A lot rides on where Willcox’s initial water duties are set, particularly if state water officials intend to cut them more deeply in subsequent management plans.

Arizona Farm Bureau has questioned whether the department has legal authority to make those cuts. State law says water duties must be calculated as “the quantity of water reasonably required to irrigate the crops historically grown in the farm unit.” A key part of the answer is how much water crops need not just to stay alive, but to produce a healthy yield. University of Arizona agronomist Jeff Silvertooth has spent much of his career researching this question. He and colleague Randy Norton have taken a deeper drive into water allotment calculations after farmers contacted Silvertooth with questions. They found, for example, that corn grown in Willcox requires differing amounts of water, depending on whether it is grown for grain or silage. The same goes for perennial crops such as hesperaloe that require little water when mature but a lot more while establishing their roots. Silvertooth said officials have been receptive to feedback about these and other major crops grown in the basin.

Reaction in Willcox Is Mixed

Haas, who has long advocated for additional regulation and serves on the basin’s groundwater advisory board, agreed. State water officials had the difficult task of balancing those who wanted faster and more stringent cuts with those who wanted few or no changes. “They created a measured plan,” he said. “It’s setting a tone, one that I think will allow us to continue farming but also start looking at alternate cropping patterns and more intensive irrigation management.” David Collins, who serves with Haas on the Cochise County Farm Bureau board, is more skeptical that the plan will save water over time because of how efficient farmers already are. “A 50% cut will hurt no matter what the initial duties come in at,” he said. “But that’s also 50 years down the road, and who knows what the later revisions will look like.” Collins opposed regulation initially because voters had previously rejected the question. “That’s beside the point,” he said. “It’s here now. We’ve just got to take it and try to work with it.”



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November 16-17: Delegates Set the Course for Arizona Agriculture

By Staff Reports

You Help Carry the Ultimate Power in Farm Bureau

You've been tapped by your County Farm Bureau president to serve as a delegate at the Arizona Farm Bureau Annual Meeting this November 16-17. Whether you earned the spot through active involvement or were selected unexpectedly, this role hands you a prime chance to shape agriculture's hottest issues and our state's agriculture future. Plus, you'll enjoy network-

ing with fellow farmers and ranchers across Arizona, gain fresh insights, and have a blast in the process. To make the most of your delegate vote, connect with your County President or Policy Development Chair ahead of time. If any, dive into the policies your county is pushing for state-level consideration, along with key proposals from others. These are typically hashed out at October's county board meetings. Mark your calendar and show up to stay in the loop. If you've been knee-deep in your county's policy discussions, you're already ahead of the game. By the time November 16-17 rolls around, you'll have a solid, informed stance on these critical topics. The meeting packs a full agenda: tackling resolutions and hearing from top-notch speakers. Every Farm Bureau policy begins at the grassroots county

level, then gets debated, refined, and voted on by delegates like you. In the resolutions session, team up with your county crew to fine-tune language that becomes official state policy and even advances to the American Farm Bureau if the policy has national implications. That might involve rallying support from other counties to back your views. This year, our keynote speaker is American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall. Don't forget to register now, book your hotel, and gear up for full engagement. You'll head back to your farm or ranch energized with new ideas, lasting connections, and robust policies. Best of all, you'll leave a real imprint on the agriculture industry you cherish and fight to strengthen nationwide. 🚜



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EPA and Army Propose Additional Changes to WOTUS Definition

By **Ana Otto**, Arizona Farm Bureau Government Relations Manager

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Army Corps of Engineers have issued a supplemental proposal addressing the definition of “waters of the United States” (WOTUS) under the Clean Water Act. The proposal adds narrower alternatives to those proposed in November 2025 and seeks additional public input before developing a final rule. The proposal builds on the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2023 decision in *Sackett v. EPA*, which narrowed federal Clean Water Act jurisdiction, rejected the “sig-

nificant nexus” test, and limited jurisdiction over adjacent wetlands to those with a continuous surface connection to relatively permanent waters. EPA and the Army are seeking comment on whether “relatively permanent” waters should be limited to those with standing or continuously flowing water throughout the year under ordinary conditions. The agencies are also requesting input on whether wetlands should qualify as WOTUS only when they maintain a perennial surface-water connection to a

relatively permanent water. For farmers, ranchers, and landowners, these definitions matter because they determine which waters and wetlands fall under federal Clean Water Act requirements. The proposal could further narrow federal jurisdiction while providing greater clarity and regulatory certainty after years of changing WOTUS definitions. The 30-day public comment period closes October 9, 2026. 🚜

Court Rules on Adverse Effect Wage Rate

By **Chad Smith**, Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Government Relations

On Aug. 26, a federal judge in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California ruled in favor of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in a lawsuit challenging the U.S. Department of Labor’s (DOL) methodology for calculating wages paid to H-2A workers. The case centered on an Interim Final Rule (IFR) issued by DOL in October 2025 that significantly changed how the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) is calculated for H-2A workers. The AEWR is the minimum wage employers must pay H-2A workers to ensure that the employment of foreign agricultural workers does not adversely affect the wages of similarly employed U.S. workers.

Under the 2025 rule, DOL shifted to wage data from the Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) program and established two wage tiers based on job experience requirements. The rule also addressed the disaggregation of jobs within Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes and incorporated wage data outside of the five SOC codes historically used for agricultural occupations. In addition, DOL established an Adverse Compensation Adjustment (ACA) intended to account for certain non-wage costs associated with employing H-2A workers, like housing. The rule took effect immediately and applied to H-2A petitions filed under the new methodology.

The Outcome

In November 2025, UFW filed suit against DOL, arguing that the new methodology substantially reduced agricultural wages and failed to meet statutory requirements intended to protect the wages of similarly employed U.S. workers. UFW also argued that DOL improperly issued the rule without providing the required opportunity for public notice and comment and that the methodology was arbitrary and capricious. In its Aug. 26 decision, the court agreed with UFW and determined that the IFR was unlawful. However, the court did not immediately vacate or enjoin the rule. As a result, the current AEWR methodology and wage rates remain in effect for the time being.

Instead, the court remanded the rule to DOL and directed the agency to develop a new methodology that adequately explains how the AEWRs are calculated and publish updated wage rates based on that methodology.

Immediate Takeaway

For Arizona agricultural employers, the immediate takeaway is that there is no change to the current AEWR today. However, the ruling creates uncertainty about what the future wage rates will look like and how quickly DOL will develop and implement a replacement methodology. The court’s order also addresses the potential for retroactive wage liability. DOL is required to notify employers that they could potentially owe back wages based on the difference between the current AEWR and the new rate once it is established. Importantly, any potential backpay obligation would run from Aug. 26, 2026, the date of the court’s order, to

the effective date of the new rule. The ruling does not require employers to recalculate wages for the entire duration of existing H-2A contracts. Arizona producers should continue to follow the AEWR currently in effect while monitoring DOL’s next steps. The timing and substance of a new methodology, along with the resulting wage rates, will be important issues for agricultural employers, as changes to the AEWR can have a direct impact on labor costs and production decisions. Arizona Farm Bureau will continue to monitor the process and keep members informed of developments affecting the H-2A program and Arizona agriculture.

The ruling underscores the need for Congress to advance the Securing Agriculture’s Workforce Act (SAWA), which provides greater certainty and predictability for agricultural employers. SAWA includes a provision that would codify the October 2025 AEWR methodology while establishing a maximum annual wage increase of 3.25% or a maximum decrease of 1.5%. Arizona Farm Bureau will continue advocating for congressional action on SAWA as a means of providing agricultural employers with greater stability in managing their workforce and planning for future labor costs. 🚜



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