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CONVERSATION WITH YUMA'S CENTER OF EXCELLENCE DIRECTOR: TANYA HODGES

By Julie Murphree, Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Strategic Communications

Equipped with over three decades' experience in academia and the agricultural industry, Tanya Hodges serves as the Executive Director of the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA).

A Yuma native, Hodges' family roots in Yuma County extend six generations. Growing up in a family deeply connected to farming, she developed a passion for the industry and its related business, science, and technology fields.

She brings 16 years of experience in the agricultural industry and another 16 years' experience in agricultural academia to her role at YCEDA. Hodges earned a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Education from the University of Arizona, graduating from the College of Agriculture, Life, and Environmental Sciences. Subsequently, she earned her Doctor of Education in Innovation and Leadership from Arizona State University.

In her previous role, Hodges served as the Regional Academic Programs Manager and Director of Workforce Development and Grants for the University of Arizona Yuma Distance Campus. Within the past three years, Hodges and her team have been awarded nearly \$4 million to provide support tools and resources for Yuma students.

She also worked to bridge collaboration between the University of Arizona Distance Campus and the Yuma and Imperial Valley agricultural industries to create the Agriculture Systems Management degree, designed specifically to meet the region's workforce demands.

Hodges is well versed in grassroots advocacy and policy development having served several terms as the Yuma County Farm Bureau president, a volunteer leadership position that so many farmers and ranchers proclaim hones their leadership skill set.

Arizona Agriculture: I'm sure it's been a whirlwind for you in this new position as YCEDA Executive Director. Talk about your role and your excitement about the position.

Hodges: Reflecting on the past nine months, I am filled with gratitude and excitement about my time at the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert



Executive Director Tanya Hodges brings not only professional experience from the university side of things, but as a sixth generation Yuman she can identify with the region's standing and potential.

ert Agriculture since stepping into the role of Executive Director. These past nine months have been a period of remarkable achievements and promising developments for YCEDA. The more I experience and learn about how YCEDA distinguishes itself as a unique public-private partnership centered on research and innovation, the more I recognize the vital and impactful collaboration between the University of Arizona and the agriculture industry.

Having spent many years working in agriculture and academia, I have witnessed our industry's challenges and opportunities firsthand. My journey began with a deep-rooted passion for farming, which led me to pursue an education in agricultural sciences. This foundation allowed me to work closely with farmers and researchers, gaining valuable insights into the intricacies of desert agriculture.

Before joining YCEDA, I had the privilege of building and developing the UA Yuma Academic Campus and was a part of our family agriculture business, Southwest Transplants, and H&H Seed Company, where I developed and implemented agriculture programs and learned farming and agriculture business practices. Serving several terms as the Yuma County Farm Bureau President provided invaluable experience advocating for farmers' interests and collaborating on initiatives to improve agricultural policies and practices. My experience in the academic and practical aspects of agriculture has equipped me with a unique perspective that I bring to my role at YCEDA.

YCEDA's ability to focus on ongoing applied research and innovation while working closely with the agriculture industry has significantly strengthened our ties with growers and stakeholders. We have engaged in conferences, workshops, and outreach programs that have resonated with the agricultural community. For instance, the AgTech Conference attracted participants from eight countries and seven states, demonstrating our global reach and influence. Additionally, the T&A-sponsored Soil Health Workshop in Salinas, California, and the two-day Fusarium Wilt of Lettuce

SEE YUMA'S CENTER OF EXCELLENCE DIRECTOR PAGE 4

AFBF PRESIDENT TESTIFIES BEFORE SENATE COMMITTEE ON CURRENT STATE OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE

By Julie Murphree, Arizona Farm Bureau Director of Strategic Communications

Last month American Farm Bureau (AFBF) President Zippy Duvall presented testimony on the state of American agriculture before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. He shared his boots-on-the-ground account on what is happening in farm and ranch country.

"My testimony today is not much different than it was two years ago when I was asked to testify in front of you," began President Duvall. "Despite the assistance in the CR, farmers still are looking to you all to pass a modernized, five-year farm bill as soon as possible. In addition to the farm



American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall Testifies before Congress regarding important passage of a new farm bill and other critical farm and ranch issues.

and crop protection."

Arizona Farm Bureau President and Yuma farmer John Boelts further explained why it's so critical that the new U.S. Congress act quickly on farm and ranch matters especially on the labor front. "America's farms and ranches

bill concern of two years ago, farm families are now facing the prospects of the largest tax increase in U.S. history if Congress does not pass critical tax reform legislation this year. These are two of the many issues that I will cover in my testimony today. Farmers face several concerns related to their region, weather, trade barriers,

SEE AFBF PRESIDENT TESTIFIES BEFORE SENATE PAGE 7



IN THIS ISSUE...

The Thin Green Line - Page 2

- Aggies: Your Frontline

Latest on our Legislature - Page 5

- Water Tops the Chart

Podcast - Page 8

- Fill Your Plate NOW

AGRICULTURE’S THIN GREEN LINE

By John Boelts, Arizona Farm Bureau President

It’s dawn in America and we’re all getting up and going on with our day. Going to work, going to school, going on vacation or maybe even staying home, but very few of us spend time thinking about where the basic necessities that will sustain our day and our very lives will come from. What a blessing that is, but it is also a curse. If we’re in agriculture, our getting up to go to work means we’re protecting our own “Thin Line.”

Yes, I’m alluding to the term “thin blue line,” representing the concept of our gallant police force across the United States as the frontline keeping society from descending into violence and chaos. In agriculture, we must realize we have our own version of this. Since we, average Americans, don’t think about where our food, shelter or clothing comes from that much, it may not come naturally to ponder these concepts, but everyone in agriculture serving on the frontline becomes the protector of the THIN GREEN LINE that separates us from starvation and death.

What is the thin green line? We sing about America’s abundance and bounty in songs like America the Beautiful: “Amber waves of grain,” and “the fruited plains.” It happens in the places where food, feed, forage and fiber are grown and harvested. This is modern agriculture. Over the last 10,000 years humans have been cultivating what we now enjoy as the most remarkable human accomplishment, food security through modern agriculture. The necessities of life seem to be available and affordable so much so that we don’t have to think about them. So why is that a curse?

THE CURSE

The curse comes in the form of experience and misinformation. Because most of us don’t work on a farm, and most people don’t raise their own crops, we no longer can experience farm and ranch life firsthand. The joys and defeats of raising food, and the impacts that insects or weather can have on that food are not experiences that most of us have. On the misinformation side, much of the misunderstanding comes from not knowing what

modern agriculture’s tools for advancement involve.

Several things make modern agriculture work. First and foremost is the natural world we live in. Farmers and ranchers, loggers and fisherman all tend to their crops and work with nature to harvest her bounty. However, severe weather, insects, plant and animal diseases, drought and wildlife all conspire to destroy or consume our basic necessities of life before they can be harvested and sold to us. Research, knowledge, hard work and technology are all essential to accomplishing this task of feeding everyone every day and supplying life’s basic necessities. Some examples of those technologies are mined and man-made fertilizers that help crops grow more abundantly. Some of those fertilizers are dug out of the ground in mines, like phosphate. Others are synthesized by man-made processes. These man-made fertilizers work just like naturally occurring fertilizers (manure) in supplying plant nutrients. Plant life is agnostic and will take up nutrients wherever they come from.

Another important and carefully vetted technology is pesticides. These are tools that have been thoroughly researched and found to be safe if used as labeled, that keep diseases and insects from consuming or destroying your food before you get to eat it. Other technologies include improvements to seed through crossbreeding, development of new seeds that grow crops that can defend themselves from various diseases without the use of pesticides, and the use of agricultural equipment that provides the opportunity for most people not to have to work on farms to grow their own food.

Another aspect of modern agriculture is the storage and delivery of irrigation water by efficient means, at the appropriate time, to food and feed crops. This provides so many of the healthy foods that we need in our diets every day, such as vegetables and fruit grown in California and Arizona with irrigation water, or tree fruits grown in Michigan, Washington State or Florida, and across America the Beautiful.

Science based and proven practices of animal husbandry and veterinary medicine are additional tools in the agriculture toolkit. Responsible forest, Rangeland and fisheries management and harvesting are critical and if done right would prevent our catastrophic fires we’ve become all too familiar with. There are many ways modern agriculture works so well for us that we rarely hear about! Again, this becomes the curse.

This is the thin green line that separates each and every one of us from starvation and death. It’s thin because our advantage over nature is a narrow advantage. It didn’t happen by accident. If you look back through your family history, all of us have ancestors who were farmers, loggers, fisherman, or ranchers. Sometimes for many generations in a row, our ancestors toiled to improve agriculture and make it modern agriculture.

We suffered through countless millennia prior to the advent of agriculture 10,000 years ago. And while our ancestors suffered, they worked tirelessly in the hope of what modern agriculture would someday become in these last 150 years.

Only a fraction of our economy these days is based on food. This is remarkable given the importance of food to each one of us. Our entire economy hinges on the success of modern agriculture to keep food abundantly affordable, so that people have money to spend on every other segment of the economy. Modern agriculture made this so and should not be taken for granted. We did not get here by accident. We got here through science, hard work and continual efforts to improve what each generation did before us. The blessings we now enjoy could be easily lost due to the curse of not having the experiences of our ancestors, in addition to the misinformation we are currently subjected to.

The fragility of our “thin green line” is why Farm Bureau members are so important. We have a job to do, and it’s not just raising our livestock and our crops, or harvesting timber and fish, but rather to effectively share why and how we do what we do. Every day, your membership dollars are working hard at the state capital and in our nation’s capital, advocating for good public policy. Every day your membership dollars are at work in classrooms across Arizona and across our nation teaching agriculture in the classroom. Everyday your membership dollars are at work interacting with the press and promoting modern agriculture, telling our story accurately and completely.

However, there is always an opportunity to do more and that’s what I ask of each of you as members is to prepare yourself for those conversations about genetically engineered crops, responsible grazing and timber harvest, or the advances in pesticides or veterinary medicine with your friends and neighbors, or your congressman. Apply for Boot Camp or join PAL to learn about how you can most effectively share what you know that everyone else needs to hear about modern agriculture, all efforts to push back the misinformation and help Americans that have no experience with farming and ranching at least appreciate and understand the industry better.

Thank you for your membership in our organization, and I ask you, “What you can do to help ensure that modern agriculture is a blessing that continues for generations?” The Answer: Stay engaged so this huge blessing called “modern agriculture” doesn’t become a curse to those that benefit from it most. If we don’t get this right, those amongst us with the most modest means are the most vulnerable by bad public policy and misinformation about agriculture.

We have work to do. Join us in protecting the “Thin Green Line!” 🚜

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YUMA'S CENTER OF EXCELLENCE DIRECTOR *continued from Page 1*

Field Day and workshop were instrumental in sharing knowledge and best practices with over 800 participants.

These events highlight our commitment to addressing real-world challenges and showcase the collaborative spirit that defines YCEDA. Our dedicated team and strong partnerships with industry leaders, growers, and academic institutions have been key to our success. By fostering innovation, promoting sustainable practices, and ensuring that our research is relevant and actionable, we continue to drive progress and make a meaningful impact on the agricultural community. I am incredibly proud of what YCEDA has accomplished. I look forward to continuing this journey and furthering our efforts to support and enhance desert agriculture.

Arizona Agriculture: While so many of us in agriculture know why agriculture research is so important, especially when partnered with industry partners, explain in your own words why all the research centers are so important?

Hodges: University research centers play a pivotal role in driving progress and innovation across various fields.

These centers of excellence are dedicated to advancing understanding in specific disciplines, conducting cutting-edge research that can lead to breakthroughs in science, technology, medicine, and more. By fostering an innovative environment, they help push the boundaries of what we know and what is possible. Through this mission, they attract top-tier faculty, researchers, and students eager to engage in high-level research. This concentration of talent enhances the institution's reputation and creates a vibrant academic community where ideas can flourish.

The research conducted at these centers often leads to new technologies, products, and services that can have significant economic impacts.

Additionally, they address societal challenges, from healthcare and environmental sustainability to social justice and education, contributing to the well-being of communities locally and globally. These centers often promote interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing together experts from various fields to tackle complex problems that cannot be solved by a single discipline alone. This cross-pollination of ideas can lead to innovative solutions and new approaches to research.

By producing high-quality research, centers of excellence attract funding from government agencies, private industry, and philanthropic organizations. This investment supports further research, infrastructure development, and educational programs, creating a cycle of growth and improvement. In essence, centers of excellence are hubs of innovation and knowledge, driving progress and shaping the future through their contributions to science, technology, and society.

Arizona Agriculture: Highlight how industry-driven YCEDA is and explain in more detail.

Hodges: The Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture is a unique public-private partnership and center for research and innovation, a pioneering collaboration between the University of Arizona and the agriculture industry. As such, YCEDA distinguishes itself as a leading institute through its unique public-private partnership model, combining the strengths of the University of Arizona and the agriculture industry. This collaboration leverages private funding and industry guidance to drive applied research in arid environments, ensuring the research is relevant and rapidly applicable. YCEDA is a hub for innovation, providing actionable information that enhances food production systems and improves human health. By fostering partnerships between research and industry communities, YCEDA increases visibility and supports innovative research, delivering results at the speed industry demands. Established to address the unique challenges of cropping systems and farming in the southwest arid regions, YCEDA ensures university researchers have producer input and access to real-world conditions, allowing for a better understanding of producer challenges and needs. Recognizing the need for more resources and local leadership to support the Yuma agriculture industry, YCEDA was formed to meet these demands and drive impactful research and innovation.

This innovative structure and collaboration leverage private funding and guidance to drive applied research in arid environments, providing the agriculture industry with actionable information that enhances food production systems and improves human health. Through our unique partnerships between the research and industry communities, we gain visibility, increasing the opportunity to support innovative research while delivering results at the speed industry demands. We are committed to fostering research, innovation, and the advancement of technologies through cross-disciplinary initiatives and active collaboration with industry, scientists, and engineers.

Ultimately, the YCEDA mission works to enhance food production systems, improve human health, and support sustainable practices in arid regions. This further distinguishes it as a specialized center dedicated to addressing critical agricultural challenges.

Arizona Agriculture: Share one or two special stories you would like to talk about with our Arizona farmers, certainly our Yuma farmers.

Hodges: Many farmers and agriculture industry members are active and involved in YCEDA, serving on the advisory council technical committees and developing and implementing our research initiatives or events. Here are three examples of the amazing ways our agriculture partners impact the work of YCEDA.

Story 1: President of Smith Farms, Mark Smith, is a prominent figure in Yuma, Arizona's agricultural community. Mark Smith is also a member of the YCEDA Advisory Council, where he plays a key role in guiding the center's research and programs. His involvement helps ensure that YCEDA's projects address the real-time needs of the agricultural industry in the desert region. Mark has been instrumental in advancing agricultural technology and supporting the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA). Mark has been a driving force behind the expansion of agricultural technology in Yuma. Over the past seven years, his efforts have focused on improving the region's broadband infrastructure, which is crucial for modern farming practices. By leading the Yuma County Broadband Task Force and working with the Arizona Commerce Authority, he has helped Yuma County secure funding and support for installing the fiber-optic networks through the YCEDA/Yuma County Middle Mile Project. As part of the \$31 million Arizona State award, a \$6 million Ag Tower project aims to provide high-speed internet access to Yuma County's greenbelt farms, enabling farmers to utilize advanced technologies for better crop management and

productivity.

Beyond his work with YCEDA, Mark Smith has been actively involved in various water agencies and agricultural boards in the Yuma area. He has served as President of the Yuma Irrigation District's Board of Directors and has been a director since 1983. His leadership in these roles has been vital in addressing water management issues and supporting the agricultural community.

I don't think there has been a day yet that Mark and I have not communicated. His dedication to advancing agricultural technology and his support for YCEDA have significantly impacted my short tenure with YCEDA. Mark is a natural teacher, and it is through this that I have learned and been able to wrap my arms around the details of the AgTech Middle Mile Project and Ag Towers system that will help integrate AgTech into the Yuma region.

Story 2: Jesus Tovar, the President of T&P Farms, Inc., has significantly contributed to the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA). His dedication to advancing agricultural research and technology is evident through his support for creating YCEDA's One Health lab. In 2020, Jesus Tovar generously donated funds to establish YCEDA's One Health biosafety level 2 laboratory located at the Yuma Agricultural Center. This lab focuses on wastewater-based epidemiology (WBE), a public health tool that monitors wastewater to detect and mitigate the spread of diseases, including COVID-19.

Jesus Tovar's contributions have enabled YCEDA to conduct weekly wastewater testing in Yuma County, helping to detect SARS-CoV-2 infections and prevent outbreaks. The lab's capabilities were further enhanced to include near real-time SARS-CoV-2 variant testing through genome sequencing, improving monitoring efforts, and identifying new variants.

Today, the YCEDA One Health lab, utilizing sequencing technology, performs in-depth assessments of viral behaviors in Yuma County communities, particularly during peak agriculture seasons. This research allows for the identification of patterns in viral transmission and provides valuable data for public health responses to emerging and seasonal infectious threats. The data provides a blueprint for public health agencies and scientists worldwide to integrate wastewater data into public health actions at multiple scales. To date, this program has received more than \$3.5 million in funding to protect public health initiatives and continues to expand to other pathogen targets of public health concern, such as influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), enteroviruses, Candida auris, as well as chemical agents.

Beyond his support for the One Health biological lab, Jesus Tovar is an active member of the YCEDA Advisory Council. His engagement with YCEDA constantly invites us to the farm to better understand agricultural practices or share ideas over the phone. He's always offering any resources we need to get the job done, showing his deep commitment to protecting the workforce and enhancing farming practices with innovative ideas that inspire and drive our research. His contributions significantly impact Yuma's community and agricultural industry. His involvement helps guide the center's research and programs, ensuring they address the real-time needs of the agricultural industry in the desert region. Tovar's leadership and dedication have been vital in fostering collaboration between scientific research and industry, promoting innovation and sustainability in desert agriculture.

Story 3: Mark Stover, the Director of Yuma and Imperial Farming Operations for Tanimura & Antle, has supported the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA), serving on the YCEDA Advisory Council and YCEDA Technical Committee. His commitment to advancing agricultural practices is evident through his involvement in creating YCEDA's Desert Agriculture Soil Health Initiative (DASHI).

Mark Stover played a crucial role in developing DASHI, which focuses on improving soil health and sustainability in desert agriculture. His extensive experience in farming, spanning over 37 years, has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in soil management. By collaborating with researchers and industry partners, Stover has helped shape the initiative to address the region's specific needs, ensuring that the practices developed are practical and effective for local growers. Current soil health assessment and management frameworks have been tailored to wetter climates, leaving the unique soil and environments of desert croplands inadequately addressed.

Beyond his contributions to DASHI, Mark Stover is dedicated to YCEDA's initiative, and the agricultural industry extends beyond his professional roles. His efforts to engage with the community and promote sustainable farming practices have significantly impacted the industry, helping to ensure a prosperous future for growers in the Desert Southwest.

Mark Stover's unwavering dedication to advancing soil health and supporting agricultural research through YCEDA's initiatives has been instrumental in fostering innovation and sustainability in the region. His contributions continue to benefit growers and farmers, ensuring a thriving agricultural community in Yuma and beyond.

Arizona Agriculture: In Arizona, with the University of Arizona as our Land Grant University, what makes our linkages with university research, Extension, and agriculture production so important?

Hodges: The collaboration between the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA), the University of Arizona (UA) Experimental Research Stations, and the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Service significantly benefits growers and farmers by streamlining the research and innovation process. These entities work together to address pressing agricultural challenges, develop practical solutions, and implement new practices effectively. YCEDA focuses on applied research and public-private partnerships, tackling disease management, food safety, soil health, and irrigation issues. By leveraging the expertise and resources of UA Experimental Research Stations, they can conduct detailed studies and test new technologies and methods in real-world settings. The Cooperative Extension Service plays a crucial role in disseminating this knowledge to the community through educational outreach, workshops, and training sessions. YCEDA enhances the University's research capabilities, fosters stronger industry partnerships, and expedites solutions addressing real-world agricultural challenges. This complements the essential work of Extension services. It's a dynamic interplay that amplifies the impact of both entities,

AMERICAN FARM BUREAU ESTABLISHES 2025 POLICIES

By Staff Reports

Like what Arizona Farm Bureau does every year in November, Farmer and rancher delegates from all over the country to the American Farm Bureau Federation’s 106th Convention in January adopted policies to guide the organization’s work in 2025. Key topics ranged from labor to rural broadband to trade.

For the third year, delegates were polled at the beginning of the voting session regarding their farms. The results show 97% of those who cast votes operate family farms and nearly two-thirds represent small- to mid-size farms as defined by USDA.

“Farm Bureau demonstrated what truly makes it the voice of American agriculture,” said AFBF President Zippy Duvall. “Delegates from each state Farm Bureau and Puerto Rico directly addressed the challenges and opportunities facing farmers and ranchers. The policies they set today give us a roadmap to work with the new administration and Congress to address the needs of rural America. It includes the passage of a new farm bill, enacting regulatory reform, and creating new markets for the men and women who are dedicated to keeping America’s pantries stocked.”

Delegates also adopted policy supporting the development and sale of domestically sourced sustainable aviation fuel, including expanding the list of acceptable conservation practices for feedstock eligibility.

They strengthened policy on alternative energy production, including increasing the responsibility of energy companies to manage land used for development, and prioritizing energy production on land not suitable for agriculture.

Recognizing the challenges of maintaining a strong agriculture workforce, delegates voted to stabilize labor costs to avoid drastic swings that put the economic sustainability of farms at risk. They also recommended

the AFBF board study potential alternatives to the current Adverse Effect Wage Rate methodology used for the H-2A program.

On trade, delegates added policy in support of a United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement review process to encourage new opportunities while protecting U.S. agriculture from unfair competition.

Policy on rural broadband was revised to support requiring companies that win broadband loans or grants to quickly complete projects in underserved rural areas. Delegates also directed AFBF to press more forcefully for reform of the current requirements for small-scale meat, dairy and value-added processing facilities.

NATIONAL PROGRAM COMMITTEES

Amy Jo Estes of Missouri and Heidi Cooper of Massachusetts were elected chair and vice chair, respectively, of the Promotion & Education Committee. Both will serve one-year terms.

Ryan MacKay of Massachusetts was elected chair of the Young Farmers & Ranchers Committee for a one-year term. Daniel Jones of California was elected vice chair and Allison Whiten of South Carolina was elected secretary. They will each serve one-year terms. The new YF&R officers begin serving in March at the end of the FUSION Conference.

Megan Floyd of South Carolina (Southern Region) was elected to a two-year term on the Women’s Leadership Committee. Marieta Hauser of Kansas (Midwest Region); Lisa Wherry of Pennsylvania (Northeast Region) and **Shawn Wood of Arizona** (Western Region) were re-elected to two-year terms. Isabella Chism of Indiana and Lorenda Overman of North Carolina were re-elected to two-year terms as committee chair and vice chair, respectively. 🚜

ARIZONA’S 2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION: RURAL GROUNDWATER REFORMS AND OTHER AGRICULTURAL PRIORITIES

By Daniel Harris, Arizona Farm Bureau Government Relations Manager

Arizona’s 57th Legislature remains in full swing, with this phase of the 2025 session displaying a vigorous pace as lawmakers tackle a broad array of issues, from public safety and tax policy to robust additions for the agricultural sector and rural economies in landmark water legislation like SB1520.

Though the session is constitutionally framed as a one hundredday period, recent experience has seen sessions stretching well beyond two hundred days, or sometimes just missing that mark. In today’s era of divided government, such extended negotiations have become the norm, adding to the increased complexity and contentious nature of policymaking.

Since the session began on January 13, legislators met early deadlines, with bill sponsorships finalized by January 16 and bill requests submitted by February 7, followed by the formal introduction of new measures on February 10. Now, with nearly half the session behind them, committee hearings and readings are intensifying as lawmakers prepare for an extended period of deliberation as Bills have crossed over from their Chamber of origin to begin the process once again before making it to the Governor’s desk to

be signed or vetoed.

Key proposals are making waves, particularly those that directly affect Arizona’s agricultural community. A standout priority for this session is SB1520, an updated effort to establish Basin Management Areas. Building on the momentum from SB1221 in 2024, SB1520, sponsored by Senator Tim Dunn, introduces a more flexible and effective framework for managing Arizona’s vital water resources. This initiative is crafted with the agricultural and rural community in mind, ensuring that the demands of water management harmonize with the needs of rural and farming areas.

As the legislation moves through committee hearings and floor debates, its proponents emphasize that SB1520 is not just about regulation, it is about protecting a resource critical to sustaining Arizona’s farms and ranches. The Arizona Farm Bureau is actively engaging with lawmakers to offer insights and safeguard our water supplies, ensuring that the interests of our agricultural communities are not only preserved but strengthened for future generations.

SEE RURAL GROUNDWATER REFORMS PAGE 8



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driving progress and innovation in agriculture, ensuring that cutting-edge research and innovations reach the farmers and growers quickly, enhancing productivity, sustainability, and economic growth in Arizona’s agricultural sector.

Arizona Agriculture: So much of what UA research centers do requires extended collaboration with all types of stakeholders, especially producers. Where do you think we can improve, and how do we achieve that?

Hodges: One of YCEDA’s greatest strengths is our collaborative spirit. We have created a vibrant knowledge exchange and resource-sharing network by building strong partnerships with growers, agricultural businesses, academic institutions, and government agencies. YCEDA’s commitment to community engagement through our partnerships with the Cooperative Extension and Research Experimental Stations remain cornerstones of our mission. These collaborations have amplified the impact of our research and fostered a sense of community and shared purpose that inspires us all.

YCEDA has proactively built connections and collaborations by sharing the story of desert agriculture and highlighting the history, efficiency, productivity, and importance of Yuma agriculture. Over the past ten years, YCEDA has organized and hosted workshops, conferences, symposia, field tours, and field days to engage academia with the agricultural community, promote applied research, drive innovation, and disseminate research findings. These events give the agriculture industry firsthand insights into YCEDA research projects and new technologies. YCEDA collaborates with educational institutions to involve students in research projects, offering hands-on learning opportunities and fostering the next generation of agricultural scientists.

We have learned the importance of ensuring consistent and effective communication with a diverse range of stakeholders and balancing the demands of outreach activities with ongoing research and operational responsibilities. The value of multimedia and diverse outreach methods in engaging and educating the public and the importance of fostering strong partnerships with educational institutions and industry stakeholders, help strengthen community ties, increase public awareness of desert agriculture challenges and innovations, and expand opportunities for student involvement and professional development in agricultural research.

Arizona Agriculture: Your position can be demanding. How do you plan to balance it all?

Hodges: Yes, YCEDA’s Executive Director position is very demanding. Fortunately, The Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture exemplifies how we can leverage the strengths of the YCEDA model and its dedicated team. YCEDA thrives on its strong partnerships with industry leaders, farmers, and academic institutions. YCEDA’s ability to pool resources, share knowledge, and address the agricultural community’s real-time needs through partnerships with the agricultural community allows research projects to be prioritized, ensuring that their efforts are aligned with the farming community’s needs. This focus on practical solutions helps expedite the research and innovation process. YCEDA brings together experts from various fields to tackle complex agricultural challenges. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges supplying integrating diverse perspectives and forming teams to develop innovative and effective solutions.

Through the leadership and teamwork of YCEDA’s small but mighty team, the responsibility is spread across many, balancing the demands and challenges of managing YCEDA.

There’s been shifts and changes in the research world including trying to adapt to the expectations and expediency of what is needed for application in production agriculture.

The YCEDA structure was explicitly designed with the private sector to ensure all research is directly informed by real-world conditions and immediate needs for economic sustainability and entrepreneurship, making YCEDA always highly relevant and rapidly applicable to industry needs. YCEDA was uniquely and specifically established as a Public Private Partnership (PPP) separate from any UA Academic college, the Arizona Cooperative Extension System, and the Arizona Experiment Station, with the director answering directly to Dr. Shane Burgess, the University of Arizona Vice President for the Division of Agriculture, Life, and Veterinary Sciences with an advisory board.

YCEDA’s research goals are thoughtfully designed to address critical challenges, promote collaboration, and strengthen national and global food security, ultimately benefiting North America’s agriculture industry and human health, further distinguishing it as a specialized center dedicated to addressing critical agricultural challenges through its research and innovation. YCEDA Research Goal Initiatives:

1. Advance the management of diseases and pests to ensure healthier crops.
2. Sustain and improve soil health in arid regions
3. Develop efficient water use practices and manage soil salinity.
4. Address existing knowledge gaps in food safety.
5. Support the integration of new ag technologies to improve desert agriculture practices.
6. Expand the One Health research program to address critical issues.
7. Validate climate-smart and regenerative agriculture practices for arid regions.
8. Enhance production efficiencies through improvements in plant nutrition and genetics.
9. Grow local food systems, foster resiliency, and stimulate the bioeconomy.
10. Close the agriculture workforce skill gaps through education, training, and workshops.

Arizona Agriculture: Can you share one or two of your more exciting and/or recent research projects being conducted at YCEDA?

Hodges: We have three exciting projects.

Project 1: Impact Soil Agriculture Soil Health Initiative (DASHI): Building Resilient Desert Agricultural Systems And Communities From The Ground Up Through Soil Health

Soil health science needs to address agricultural sustainability in arid and semiarid regions, both within the United States and globally. Current soil health assessment and management frameworks have been tailored to wetter climates, leaving the unique soils and environments of desert croplands inadequately addressed. The science of arid soil health is fragmented across institutions, disciplines, funding agencies, and stakeholder priorities, resulting in under-resourced and under-researched areas crucial to global food production.

DASHI: Though DASHI is in the beginning stages, the DASHI research program has identified specific obstacles and knowledge gaps hindering desert crop producers’ effective soil health management. It has also built a coalition of academic and governmental researchers in the southwestern United States, equipped with diverse expertise across natural and social sciences, ready to address these gaps and challenges.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, DASHI led several key efforts to begin addressing this challenge through grower and researcher hosted workshops for assessing and managing soil health, specifically in desert croplands. Additionally, we established interdisciplinary and interagency research teams, collaborating with diverse stakeholders to address top research priorities. We also accelerated state, federal, and international outreach efforts to raise awareness and secure funding for desert agricultural soil health research. Plus, we organized a Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) event to convene this year, focused on Building Resilient Desert Agricultural Systems and Communities.

The intended impact of the YCEDA DASHI program includes improved soil health understanding by defining soil health in desert croplands and identified obstacles and knowledge gaps hindering effective soil health management, further Research Collaboration and increased outreach and funding.

The project’s future goals will provide a tailored suite of soil health indicator for assessing soil health in desert croplands, develop data-based soil management tools and practices, identify regenerative, climate-smart, and sustainability practices relevant to desert agriculture. Dr. Blankinship is kicking off the inaugural Yuma Soil Health Assessment to evaluate a common suite of desert-tailored biological, chemical and physical soil health indicators.

Project 2. Impact Salinity and Water Management Initiative: Advancing Sustainable Agriculture

The Yuma area is one of the world’s most productive cropping regions. Because this productivity depends on irrigation water from the Colorado River, effective and efficient use of water is of utmost importance for growers. Using water effectively and efficiently ensures that scarce supplies are not wasted, optimizes nutrient use, and minimizes threats from plant diseases. Intimately related is salinity control, which must be tracked and managed along with irrigation supplies to ensure sustainability.

Since 2016, the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture (YCEDA) has led a collaborative, multi-institutional project to quantitatively track water use and salt balance. Advanced technologies, including electromagnetic surveys (EM38), eddy covariance (ECV) systems, large aperture scintillometer (LAS) instrumentation, drones with remote sensors, and satellites, have been utilized to measure evapotranspiration (ET) and soil salinity.

The comprehensive dataset generated from these measurements is being used to develop a knowledge base for optimal water and soil salinity management. It is a key component of DesertAgWISE.org, an online tool that will help growers optimize crop growth and salt-leaching irrigation.

Project 3: YCEDA Ag-Tech Initiative

Yuma is a key agricultural hub, contributing approximately \$4.4 billion annually to Arizona’s economy by supplying lettuce, fresh vegetables, and other crops to the nation. However, rising labor costs and growing emphasis on sustainable practices for water, pesticide, and fertilizer use have created increasing challenges for local producers. In response, many growers have embraced technologies such as automated crop thinners, spray drones, and sensors to adapt to these pressures.

As these technologies continue to advance, they require reliable broadband connectivity for practical implementation. Drones, fleets of automated machinery, and AI-driven decision support tools depend on real-time data analysis and seamless wireless communication to function effectively. For instance, swarms of drones and automated equipment must synchronize their activities through uninterrupted communication, while AI tools require rapid, on-site data processing to assist farmers and advisors.

Yuma’s agricultural areas need high-speed, ubiquitous broadband access to integrate these innovations fully. Many growers operate across multiple locations, and for new technologies to be practical, they must work reliably at all farm sites. Ensuring consistent connectivity across Yuma’s greenbelt is essential to supporting the adoption of these cutting-edge solutions and maintaining the region’s productivity. The need for greater broadband access in Yuma County is greater than agriculture alone; until recently, up to 45% of County residents were without high-speed broadband—a major issue mirrored across much of rural America.

However, significant investments in Yuma’s economy seek to tackle these challenges.

In 2021, Yuma County was awarded \$31 million of federal funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) COVID-19 relief funds to build a high-speed fiber optic “Middle Mile” broadband network to expand access to high-speed Internet connectivity to residents and businesses across Yuma County.

YCEDA, in cooperation with Yuma County and others, is using a \$6 million NSF grant to build a rural broadband network exclusively for the local agriculture industry to foster ag-tech adoption. The network will feature 27 strategically placed towers connected to the Middle Mile, ensuring low latency, high speed, and symmetrical upload/download rates critical for AI applications. Each tower will be able to support numerous broadcasting devices via independent fiber strands, enabling diverse field technologies to operate without bandwidth competition.

YCEDA AgTech Impacts

- Partnered by The U of A Cyber Experiment Station, Sun Corridor Network, and other key stakeholders, YCEDA helped establish a wireless

RURAL GROUNDWATER REFORMS

Amid the intense legislative process, with early deadlines setting the pace and extended negotiations reflecting the realities of modern governance, SB1520 symbolizes a focused commitment to smart water policy. By addressing the challenges of resource management head-on, this bill is poised to become a cornerstone of Arizona’s strategy for sustainable agriculture.

Committee discussions, such as those in the House Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee, are sharpening the details of these measures while other proposals seek to streamline state operations amid emerging challenges. For Arizona’s farmers and ranchers, these legislative efforts represent a proactive commitment to water conservation and resource management, ensuring that the state’s agricultural backbone remains strong.

As debates continue amidst a politically divided landscape, stakeholders anticipate a session that may extend well beyond traditional timelines. This mid-session update reflects a period of intense legislative activity that is poised to shape Arizona’s economic and environmental future for years to come.

OTHER BILLS AGRICULTURE NEEDS TO CONSIDER

In addition to SB1520, several other bills are being closely tracked to protect and advance our agricultural community:

- HB2031 – Sponsored by Rep. Alexander Kolodin, this bill would repeal a large number of boards and commissions, including the Cotton Research and Protection, Citrus Research, and Beef Councils, transferring responsibilities to the Arizona Department of Agriculture. Its impact on longstanding agricultural advisory bodies is a key concern that we are monitoring closely.
- HB2135 – Sponsored by Rep. Selina Bliss, this measure clarifies current law that makes it unlawful to camp near water sources in a manner

continued from Page 5

that would deny wildlife or domestic stock access.

- HB2203 – Sponsored by Rep. Gail Griffin, this bill adjusts the criteria for grandfathered irrigation rights by extending the qualifying period from five to ten years, ensuring that historical water use is duly recognized in subsequent Active Management Areas.
- HB2790 – Sponsored by Rep. Mariana Sandoval, this legislation mandates heat illness prevention standards for indoor and outdoor workplaces that are above 90 Degrees.
- HB2544 – Sponsored by Rep. Lupe Diaz, this appropriation measure boosts the Arizona Department of Agriculture’s capacity by adding extra Inspectors and other key personnel needed in emergency situations.
- HB2588 – Sponsored by Rep. Gail Griffin, this bill authorizes the Arizona Game and Fish Department to issue landowner permits for wildlife management, streamlining processes for the taking of species such as elk, antelope, oryx, and deer on private lands.
- HCR2051 –Sponsored by Rep. Michele Peña, this resolution underscores the Legislature’s commitment to protecting Yuma’s agricultural industry and its essential rights to Colorado River water, acknowledging the region’s significant role in national food security.
- SB1320 – Sponsored by Sen. Timothy Tim Dunn, this bill expands the definition of “implement of husbandry” to include autonomous and automated agricultural vehicles, ensuring that modern farming practices are supported as technology continues to evolve. 🚗

Editor’s Note: Given the fast-changing environment of the Legislature, these bills reflect their current version as of this writing. For more up to date information, follow along at www.azleg.gov

AFBF PRESIDENT TESTIFIES BEFORE SENATE

have been withering on the vine due to a lack of labor for growing, harvesting and trucking the bounty of America’s farm and ranch lands. This shortage of workers has been going on since the early 1990s, and Congress has failed to act.”

On the Farm Bill

From AFBF President Duvall’s testimony, “As Congress begins its work on the 2025 farm bill, Farm Bureau supports the following principles to guide the development of programs:

- Increase baseline funding commitments to farm programs;
- Maintain a unified farm bill that includes nutrition programs and farm programs together; and
- Prioritize funding for risk management tools, which include both federal crop insurance and commodity programs.

“Farmers and ranchers have faced unprecedented volatility in recent

continued from Page 1

years. From pandemic lockdowns and supply chain disruptions to highly pathogenic avian influenza, and record-high input costs, farmers have dealt with a barrage of impacts to their farms outside of their control.

“It has now been seven years since Congress has passed a farm bill. Farm Bureau is again asking Congress to roll up its sleeves and pass a modernized five-year bill early on in this Congress.

“In 2025, farmers will plant one of the most expensive crops ever. Thanks to rising interest rates, higher energy prices, and input costs that have gone unchecked, choosing whether to plant or not is one a decision that many farmers face. It is in this context that we are asking for an increase to the farm bill’s Title I safety net.

“USDA’s most recent Farm Sector Income Forecast has shown a \$41-billion decrease in net farm income, down nearly 25% from 2022.

“Since crop prices peaked in 2022, they have taken a nosedive. Corn and wheat are down 37%, soybeans down 28% and cotton down 22%.

“At the same time, input prices have remained high. As compared to 2020, the cost to produce an acre of corn has grown by nearly 30% nationally. The combination of low crop prices and high input costs has many farmers facing losses on every acre they plant.

“Despite these increased costs, 2024 payments to farmers are projected to be the lowest since 1982 – over four decades ago. Again, highlighting this reinforces the need for increased coverage in Title I.”

ON THE 2025 TAX BILL

“We also can’t ignore that at this time of great economic uncertainty, farmers, ranchers and many other small businesses are staring down what may be the largest tax increase in American history,” said Duvall before the Committee.

“Failing to extend the expiring provisions of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act would take billions of dollars out of farmers’ pockets when they have no dollars to spare. Congress must find a way to create a stable business environment by making permanent the expiring TCJA provisions and ensure America’s farms and ranches can continue to provide the food, renewable fuel and fiber this country needs.”

ON THE AG WORKFORCE

Said Duvall, “Without diminishing the previous two issues, the greatest domestic policy threat to American agriculture is the persistent inaction to find a solution to our workforce needs.”

Continuing, he said, “In short, the costs are too high, the domestic willingness to work is too low, and family farms are closing down. This is heartbreaking and has direct and tangible impacts to our rural communities.

“While not under this committee’s jurisdiction, labor is by far the leading issue I hear about when I visit with my members.

“I implore the members of this committee and this body to meet us at the table to get this done – to do right by our farmers and their employees who labor in the fields so you and I don’t have to.”

Boelts and other farmers in Arizona know all too well the tough labor environment. Said Boelts, “We need a streamlined guest worker program (H2A), that works for agricultural workers as well as agricultural employers. We also need Congress to grant the opportunity for new immigrants to move to our country legally, and work on America’s farm and ranches.”

Arizona Farm Bureau’s Government Relations Director had encouraging words to say from last month’s testimony. “I commend President Duvall for his strong advocacy and testimony before the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee,” added Chad Smith. “This is a prime example of your membership dues at work, representing Arizona’s farmers and ranchers, as well as those across our nation. The Farm Bill and taxes are two key priorities set by the Arizona Farm Bureau Board of Directors for 2025. ‘Passing the Farm Bill while addressing the looming tax cliff that agriculture faces at the end of 2025 will be a significant challenge. However, through our grassroots advocacy, we will continue urging our congressional leaders to act. The time to act is now.” 🚗



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DISCOVER LOCAL, FRESH, AND COST-EFFECTIVE EATING WITH “FILL YOUR PLATE NOW” PODCAST

By Staff Reports

THE PODCAST AIRS EVERY THURSDAY MORNING AT 7:00 A.M. ON MOST PODCAST CHANNELS.

Imagine a world where you know exactly where your food comes from, support local farmers, and enjoy meals that are both fresh and deliciously cost-effective. That’s the vision behind the new podcast, “Fill Your Plate Now.” This innovative show aims to connect listeners directly with the source of their sustenance, transforming the way they think about food.

“Fill Your Plate Now” isn’t just about feeding bodies nor is it a cooking show; it’s about enriching lives. Hosted by the dynamic duo of Julie Murphree, a farm girl with a passion for Arizona agriculture, and Tammy Baker, known as the “Nutrition Ninja,” this podcast offers listeners a unique blend of educational content and practical advice. Each episode delves into the world of sustainable and modern farming practices, revealing how these methods can benefit both one’s health and wallet.

Listeners will discover nutritional home-cooking hacks that make it easy to prepare meals that are both healthy and economical. The podcast also explores the latest in food and farm technology, showing how innovation in agriculture can lead to better, more accessible and safe food choices.



Every Thursday morning at 7:00, “Fill Your Plate Now” airs on all the major podcast channels, inviting listeners to join a growing movement. This isn’t just about eating; it’s about embracing a journey to wellness and wealth and wisdom about Arizona agriculture. With each bite, listeners get closer to the farm gate and healthy eating. It’s also easy to access on www.azfb.org, www.fillyourplate.org and <https://arizonamilk.org/>.

By tuning in, listeners not only become smarter consumers but also contribute to a community that values health, happiness, and financial wisdom in food shopping. Whether one is a food enthusiast, a health-conscious individual, or someone looking to support local

economies, “Fill Your Plate Now” promises to be the weekly guide to a better, more connected way of living through food.

Special Note: Farm and ranch members, consider this as another tool in your toolbox to share with your network, family and friends, for them to learn more about Arizona agriculture and nutrition. This weekly podcast is sponsored by the Arizona Milk Producers and Arizona Farm Bureau. It’s also easy to access on www.azfb.org, www.fillyourplate.org and <https://arizonamilk.org/>

YUMA’S CENTER OF EXCELLENCE DIRECTOR continued from Page 6

“Smart Farm” at the Yuma Agricultural Center experiment station. Providing wireless connectivity broadcast across 150+ acres, the Smart Farm will serve as a testbed for innovative ag-tech developers to test and refine their technologies in real-world desert farming conditions.

- Currently engaged with multiple partners to design and build a wireless broadband service network dedicated to agriculture, covering over 180,000+ acres of irrigated farmland in Yuma County.
- Hosted the 2024 Desert Difference: A Showcase of AgTech Opportunities for Growing in the Desert conference, which connected over 800+ participants, including local growers, technology developers, and researchers. A major highlight of the conference was the field demonstration day, where ag-tech companies demonstrated their cutting-edge technology in action to a crowd of growers and other ag industry representatives, fostering local networking and business development.

Arizona Agriculture: Anything special you’d like to say to our farmer/rancher readers?

Hodges: Over the past ten years, YCEDA has consistently addressed many agricultural challenges. These challenges have ranged from water scarcity and soil health to pest management and crop yield optimization. YCEDA has steadfastly committed to finding innovative solutions. The belief that there should be no shortage of answers has driven YCEDA to continually refine its goals and research initiatives, ensuring they align with and address the evolving needs of stakeholders.

As we look ahead to the next decade, several trends will shape the landscape of desert agriculture. Population growth will increase the demand for food, while water and land resources will become even scarcer. Warmer and dryer climates will continue to impact agricultural practices, necessitating more resilient, sustainable, and technological approaches. In response, the production of agriculture, food systems, food safety, and One Health will increasingly rely on advanced technology and scientific research. YCEDA’s role in this evolving landscape will be more crucial than ever. Bringing together experts from diverse interdisciplinary fields to develop innovative solutions to address the unique challenges of desert agriculture will help ensure food security and human health in North America and beyond. YCEDA will engage more researchers and

tackle broader issues as it expands its capabilities. This growth will enable YCEDA to contribute even more to the Desert Agriculture Industry.

I ask all Arizona growers and the agriculture industry to invest in and support YCEDA. It is not too late to support YCEDA as a tax advantage donation. <https://give.uafoundation.org/yceda>. Feel free to reach out if you have any questions or research ideas to me at thodges@arizona.edu 🚜

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