

California drought will hit cost of rice hardest

Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee, 5-22-14

How will California's epic drought hit our grocery bills? Probably not as hard as we might have feared.

That was the consensus of a panel of food and farming experts assembled for the Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce's second annual "Perspectives on Agriculture" luncheon, held Thursday at the Hyatt Regency.

"(Price increases) really won't be that huge for the average consumer," said Dan Sumner, director of the University of California Agricultural Issues Center at UC Davis. "At the supermarket, you may see a few things that are more expensive, but overall the bill won't be that much different than before the drought."

The reason: Farmers are squeezing the most out of what water they do have.

About 700 business people and farmers assembled for the "Farm-to-Fork"-themed lunch at which the main course was locally sourced chicken and asparagus salad. But water was the underlying topic of all discussion.

"We've started a statewide debate in regards to water supply," said Roger Niello, the chamber's president. "Drought is a fleeting thing, but it really puts a spotlight on the water debate."

According to estimates by UC Davis, the drought will cost about 14,500 agriculture-related jobs in the Central Valley this year. Most of those jobs are in planting and harvesting.

About 6 percent of irrigated farmland in the Valley will be left fallow this year. Since fewer acres were planted, fewer will need to be harvested. The ripple effect adds up to a \$1.7 billion economic impact.

One crop that will see a noticeable price spike: California rice.

"It's the exception," said Sumner, noting the international demand for the state's short-grained "sushi rice." "It's a unique product and a major export crop. You can't have a 20 or 25 percent reduction and not see an increase in price."

"In the Sacramento Valley, we (rice growers) usually grow 500,000 acres of rice," added Nicole Montna Van Vleck of Montna Farms in Yuba City. "This year, we've reduced our acreage (at Montna Farms) by 25, 30 percent. In some communities, rice accounts for 30 to 50 percent of all economic activity. It not only affects farmers, but suppliers."

Agriculture and business need to work together to increase awareness of their interdependency as well as water conservation, said Tim Johnson, president of the California Rice Commission. Water links everyone in the Sacramento Valley, and so does the need to conserve.

"We estimated that the amount of water it takes to irrigate the lawn at the state Capitol was enough to produce 1 million servings of rice," Johnson quipped. "When we finally got that point across, the governor agreed to let the lawn go brown."