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Water out west: How Arizona bill is helping the produce industry

By

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August 1, 2022

Water out west has always been a bit of a dry subject, but that's about to change now that the state of Arizona has passed Senate Bill 1740 — a historic water infrastructure plan that invests an unprecedented \$1 billion over three years to fund projects that will bring additional water to the state, helping to ensure that Arizona agriculture, as well as families and businesses, continue to have adequate long-term water supplies.

“S.B. 1740 positions our state for success today, tomorrow and for generations to come,” Arizona Governor Doug Ducey told *The Produce News*. “Arizona will now be able to acquire, own and store new water and we will invest heavily in conservation, efficiency, reuse and advanced water technologies like desalination. This is a historic deal that gives us better control of appropriating our water, and it will ensure that Arizona’s agriculture industry continues to prosper.”

The Arizona Farm Bureau played a major role in lobbying the bill by working with lawmakers and fellow natural resource user groups to make sure that the language reflected rural properties, according to Chelsea McGuire, director of government relations at Arizona Farm Bureau.

“More than most, farmers and ranchers know the value of water,” McGuire said. “For years, securing agriculture’s access to water has been one of Farm Bureau’s top priorities, and we’ve long believed that a critical aspect of that must include water augmentation.”

Annually, Arizona agriculture contributes \$23.3 billion to the state’s economy and supports more than 138,000 jobs.

With rapid population growth across the state, Arizona is now, more than ever, in need of additional water supplies. This statewide coordinated effort to augment water supplies through informed watershed management, conservation, additional water storage facilities and construction of desalination plants will effectively bring more water into the state without creating competition between urban and rural areas for available water, according to McGuire.

The legislation was put forth by Arizona Senator Sine Kerr and Arizona Representative Gail Griffin and passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

“Arizona is a leader in water conservation and we have proven this notion once again by passing S.B.1740,” Senator Kerr told *The Produce News*. “We will collaborate with farmers to implement drip irrigation systems and other emerging water-saving technologies. Research shows these systems can use up to 50 percent less water than traditional flood irrigation and that will go a long way in recharging our aquifers and helping to supply water for the growth that Arizona is experiencing. Water conservation benefits everyone in the long run.”

Senator Kerr, a farmer herself, went on to note that one of the main reasons Arizona has such a strong economy is because of the contributions farmers and ranchers make to their local communities, as well as the entire nation.

“While Arizona is widely believed to be an arid state primarily composed of deserts, there are numerous ecosystems within our climate-type that thrive,” she said. “For instance, 90 percent of the country’s supply of leafy greens from November to March is produced in Yuma County, which is part of my district. I firmly believe that a stable, local food supply is essential to maintaining national security, and we must therefore continue to support our farmers and ranchers.”

McGuire is hopeful that S.B. 1740 will shift the target usually placed squarely on agriculture water as the “low hanging fruit.”

“In the long term, when development has another ready source of water to rely on for growth, rather than looking to agriculture as the state’s water storage account, it helps preserve farmers’ access to water for the future,” she explained.

Members of the Arizona Farm Bureau are doing a lot to remain proactive and use water more efficiently. “Water is the most important and scarcest resource on which our farmers rely, so it’s in their best interest to use it wisely,” McGuire said.

Arizona farmers have invested countless hours and millions of dollars in water efficiency technology such as drip irrigation, soil sensors, GPS land leveling, laser light, hand-moveable sprinkler systems and more. “They have also used science to their advantage, developing methods of crop rotation and no-till that are better for both soil health and water conservation,” McGuire added.

One such farmer is John Boelts, owner and operator of Desert Premium Farms in Yuma, AZ, which grows melons and winter veg, as well as alfalfa, cotton and wheat. Boelts also serves as the first vice president of the Arizona Farm Bureau.

“The water we irrigate in Yuma terminates in all of our fields,” Boelts shared with *The Produce News*. “With not having tail water run off, we’re a lot more efficient.”

Boelts noted that one big downside farmers in Yuma face is the high concentration of salt in the Colorado River water they irrigate with.

“As we reduce water applied to crops, we very quickly run into a situation where salt becomes a factor,” he said. “I think there will be good opportunities to try different technologies to improve water irrigation and efficiency with S.B. 1740.”

Over the last 30-plus years, Yuma has reduced its Colorado River water use by 30 percent while simultaneously increasing yield and productivity by 30 percent.

However, despite the success of S.B. 1740 and existing efforts from farmers, challenges still remain when it comes to securing water for Arizona’s future and Boelts didn’t shy away from that topic.

“We have to do more to improve our wet water situation,” he said. “It’s crucial for growth, development and progress. We need to be conservative in the short-term, but we need to think big to develop wet water resources — whether it’s desalination or water augmentation. There are 40 million-plus people dependent on the Colorado River and there’s more moving here every day. While

agriculture can gain a lot by being more efficient, we're really looking towards the next step.

"I'm hoping we don't just rest on our laurels but dream big so our great grandchildren can look back and say, 'I enjoy what I have today because of those who spent the time and energy to do something about it,'" he concluded.

Photo: Arizona Governor Doug Ducey signing S.B. 1740.

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