

## **First-ever ag summit eyes jobs, other challenges with an eye toward fiscal growth**

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If 20 agriculture technicians walked into Jim Meinhardt's office, he'd hire them.

He could even pay up to \$30 an hour for those with post-high school training. But Meinhardt, president of KanEquip, a dealership with locations from Wamego to Garden City, is scratching his head about how to fill the need, especially in rural areas like western Kansas.

The Kansas agriculture workforce was just one of the issues brought up at the state's first-ever Kansas Ag Summit.

More than 400 agriculture leaders – from business owners and federal officials to commodity groups and farmers – met Tuesday.

The idea is to bring all agriculture stakeholders to the same table, allowing them to help in the formation of strategic growth plans for the state's agriculture economy.

“For the Kansas economy to grow, Kansas agriculture must grow,” said Gov. Sam Brownback, who helped open the summit.

Brownback noted commodity prices are poor – something apparent in state receipts. However, he added, veteran farmers have experienced downturns and upticks throughout their careers.

Agriculture's growth must be long-term, he said.

“You can't just say it's down and I'm down and I'm out. No,” Brownback said. “It may be down and it may be difficult right now. How do we posture ourselves to move forward when the next cycle moves up? How do we consolidate and gain position and strength in a time when it's down and other people are exiting? This is a chance for us and a time for us to really look at it and say, ‘What can we do to grow this business – grow this piece of the economy?’”

“We know we are going to have ups and downs on the prices, but we also know we have a growing world that wants more protein, wants more agricultural products, and we are going to be there to supply it.”

Brownback touted current progress, including construction of the federal government’s National Bio and Agro-defense Facility at Kansas State University and work by his staff earlier this summer to keep Cargill’s protein complex in Wichita.

Meanwhile, in Garden City, work continues on a \$235 million dairy processing plant that Brownback billed as the largest in the U.S.

“I look at it to be one of the hallmarks for continued growth for dairies – similar to when beef processing plants moved out to the High Plains,” he said.

### **Issues in agriculture**

Yet, not everything is rosy in farm country – which was one of the main focuses at the multiple hands-on sessions throughout the day.

In the morning, attendees took part in sessions about different commodities, including corn, wheat, beef and pork, as well as discussions about animal health, transportation, water, consumer awareness and global opportunities.

Participants were asked to look at what each industry does well, issues that are hindering growth, and potential solutions.

“I think if we could get a durum market in the state, it would be a huge advantage for farmers and ranchers,” said Jim Sipes, a Stanton County wheat grower.

Kansas farmers grow mostly hard red winter varieties – and there are plenty of bushels in the bins and on the ground this year. But there is a demand for durum – another class of wheat – from pasta companies, for its protein and gluten levels. It’s the smallest class of wheat, however, regarding production. A spring-planted crop, the largest acreage is in North Dakota, followed by Montana. K-State researchers are working to develop a variety for Kansas’ climate.

Other topics included barriers in the industry, including adequate land with water availability, federal regulations, housing availability in rural areas and rail access, among others.

Aaron White, executive director of the Ellis County Coalition for Economic Development, said one big issue he has approached lawmakers about is truck weights.

White said that, especially this year, farmers, elevators and others are trying to move bushels, but it's tough to find transportation due to competition in other sectors and limited drivers with CDLs.

Allowing trucks to have open weight limits would help with harvest logistics and keep grain moving, he said.

Presently, according to the Kansas Highway Patrol, the maximum gross weight on interstate highways, without a permit, is 80,000 pounds. On non-interstate highways, it is 85,500 pounds, unless otherwise posted.

White said he has been pushing for trucks to carry 85,500 to 95,000 pounds, respectively, during the harvest season. Almost all other Midwest states have enacted similar laws, he said.

### **Creating an agriculture workforce**

Issues with the state's workforce, however, were among the bigger topics that came up at many sessions.

"Immigration, kind of the elephant in the room, isn't it?" said Alan Langill, with Seneca Milk Co., during a segment on dairy industry issues.

He added, "If we don't have it, we are going to be out of business. Unless we do labor transformation into this technology that may or may not be ready for large-scale production."

In some parts of the nation and world, dairy farmers are investing in robotic milkers to help save on labor costs and issues.

"It is tough. We are looking at new technologies to eliminate labor and stuff. I don't know if that is right or wrong, but that is what we are looking at," said Brian Hemann with Ag Oasis, which operates three dairies, including MasCow Dairy and Tuls Dairy in southwest Kansas.

Hemann noted that finding help has been more difficult in the past with the competition in the oil and gas industry.

"But even now, with the downturn in the oil and gas industry, we don't have an overwhelming number of people coming to look for work," he said.

During a luncheon panel discussion, Allie Devine, the state's former secretary of agriculture and an ag attorney, said Kansas' worth growth has been tied to immigration and young people coming back to Kansas for jobs.

There are roughly 67,000 undocumented people living in Kansas, according to a study, she said. Most of those are working members of society and have documented family members who are working.

Many have come to Kansas on visas and have overstayed their visas. She said agriculture is stymied by the limited number of visas, which are usually gone the first few hours they become available.

She noted one group, the Cato Institute, has a proposal that would include creating new categories of visas where states could ask for visas, then prioritize and give out visas based on where they are needed in the industry.

“It would take Congress to act,” she said.

### **Educating youth**

KanEquip’s Meinhardt said he is going into high schools to visit with students about technical careers. Others said they wished high schools had more vocational agriculture training, helping place youths into the workforce out of high school.

Hemann said all in the ag industry could do a better job of working with community colleges or going into a high school and educating students about what career fields are available. For his business, he has established an internship program with Kansas State to bring students on site to expose them to dairy careers.

He said his dairies have a pay scale of \$45,000 to \$200,000 a year.

“We do have jobs people want, but we don’t do a good job of sharing that and going out to the community colleges and truly showing what that is. We employ nutritionists, veterinarians, and we have managers of all those facilities.

“They are hard work, but they are high-paying jobs and they are very satisfying,” Hemann said. “We tell people we feed the world, and that is a pretty important thing to be part of.”

The next step by the Kansas Department of Agriculture growth team is to compile the information. Working groups will use the sector objectives and action steps to guide development of a strategic plan for each sector.