Testimony for the Legislative Budget Committee
by Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Mike Beam
Tuesday, August 22, 2023

Update on Agriculture in Kansas

Drought
Drought continues to be on the minds of many in agriculture. The maps below show the drought status in Kansas. On the left is August 16, 2022, and on the right is August 17, 2023. While the western third of the state has received rain this summer, alleviating some drought stress, the other two thirds of the state have not benefited as much and in fact are facing more severe drought conditions than last year.

![Drought Map August 16, 2022](image1.png)

![Drought Map August 17, 2023](image2.png)

Kansas Ag Growth Summit
Last week the Kansas Department of Agriculture (KDA) hosted the Governor’s Kansas Ag Growth Summit. This year’s agenda focused on two overarching issues that affect most sectors of Kansas agriculture: Water and Workforce. Attendees split into working groups and responded to questions regarding how the state/federal agencies, along with the private sector, might address challenges pertaining to these topics. In the Water discussions we heard from stakeholders that they would like more awareness of existing state/federal and the availability of technical support to implement the programs. It was also discussed that more research and education is needed regarding crop varieties that are drought resistant and consume less water. Workforce concerns centered around the need to attract and retain employees. Generated ideas from discussion included transition programs for military and apprenticeship programs, outreach to younger children, and promoting Kansas’ quality of life to attract outside talent to our rural communities.
communities. There was also support noted for the need of federal reform of the H2A temporary agricultural worker visa program.

Neither water nor workforce challenges will be solved by one single entity but in the coming weeks KDA will develop strategies to support these ideas and work with other state agencies and stakeholders to further support the agriculture industry.

**2022 Ag Exports**
The KDA Division of Agricultural Marketing, Advocacy and Outreach offers a variety of programs and services to assist Kansas farmers, ranchers and agribusinesses as they market their food and agricultural products and services overseas.

Throughout the year, KDA leads agricultural industry-specific trade missions and hosts foreign buying teams. KDA also maintains membership in trade associations that offer exporter education, market promotion and market entry programs to enable new and established suppliers to pursue international market opportunities and fuel long-term growth. Memberships include Food Export Association Midwest, U.S. Grains Council, U.S. Livestock Genetics Export, Inc., and the U.S. Meat Export Federation. In July KDA announced that exports of Kansas products totaled $5.459 billion in 2022. This was an increase of $165 million over 2021 exports. Meat and cereals continue to be the top two commodities exported. Mexico, Japan and Canada are the top three export destinations for Kansas products.

**Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure**
KDA has been awarded a $6.46 million cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service’s Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) grant program.

The purpose of the RFSI program is to build resilience across the middle of the supply chain and strengthen local and regional food systems by creating new revenue streams for Kansas producers. Funds will support expanded capacity for the aggregation, processing, manufacturing, storing, transporting, wholesaling, and distribution of locally and regionally produced food products, including specialty crops, dairy, grains for human consumption, aquaculture, and other food products excluding meat and poultry. This program is intended to provide similar support to other programs which provided USDA funding for meat and poultry processing, but this program is focused on sectors other than meat and poultry.

KDA will work in partnership with USDA to make competitive sub-award infrastructure grants to Kansas food and farm businesses and other eligible entities, including nonprofit organizations, local government entities, tribal governments, and institutions such as schools and hospitals. It is anticipated that funds will be awarded in the summer of 2024.
**Division of Water Resources Enhancement**

In recent years, KDA has struggled to retain and recruit engineers, engineering associates and environmental scientists for our Division of Water Resources (DWR). We’ve had open positions posted for over a year and we had very few qualified applicants. Market studies confirm that state-employed engineers and engineering-related positions are acutely underpaid for what can be obtained in the private sector. In order to address this situation, Governor Kelly recommended a $1,499,645 enhancement of State General Funds for increasing salaries for these positions and for hiring an additional six positions. We are thankful and appreciative for the 2023 legislative approval of this enhancement. It will make us more competitive in recruiting new DWR staff and retaining existing staff, and will help us raise our level of customer service to the state’s water users.

An analysis conducted by the consulting firm Alfred Benesch & Company, which was commissioned by our Water Structures program to review its dam safety program, provided analyses of the disparity for KDA engineers with comparative state employees and private sector employees. This report found that DWR engineers were paid significantly less than comparable positions, with KDOT used as an example in the graph below. The extended yellow line represents the starting salaries as outlined in the November 2022 executive order.

**Staffing and Funding**

**Compensation Comparisons**

For this comparison, KDA Water Structures Engineers were compared to KDOT Engineering Associates (AE) and Professional Engineers (PE) with similar job classifications and years of experience.
At the time the 2022 executive order was implemented, KDA was supportive of the pay request moving forward as it would make KDOT more competitive with the private sector, relieving pressure on KDOT to utilize more contractual services at a premium cost for the state. KDA agreed to wait to move forward until additional funding were approved.

Prior to the 2023 legislative approved enhancement, our consultant indicated that KDA engineering salaries were significantly below market in comparison to the private sector.

Utilizing this information, DWR worked with the Office of the Secretary, KDA Fiscal and Human Resources to develop salary proposals within those authorized funding levels. In setting our pay adjustment request for engineer positions, we are working to align our engineering salaries with KDOT’s current pay scale so that engineering and specialized positions are paid similar salaries across state government. The current pay plan accommodates salary enhancements for 85 state employees, which includes all DWR staff.

The complete salary and wage enhancement package has been developed and is currently under review by the Department of Administration and Division of Budget. Once the salary and wage enhancements go through, advertising the six new positions will begin. Two of the positions will be within the Water Appropriation team focused on processing change applications. Water Structures will increase by several positions: an engineer to cover stream obstruction permitting, an additional engineer for the interstate compact team, a GIS specialist for all of DWR, and a grant coordinator.

Thank you for supporting the necessary funding to provide salary enhancements. I look forward to being able to notify employees of their enhancements once it is fully implemented.

**Wildfire Task Force**

It has been a privilege to chair the Governor’s Wildfire Task Force since its formation in July of 2022. The task force members represent many state and local agencies and organizations which are directly involved in wildfire mitigation, response and recovery, as well as private citizens who have experienced wildfire events in recent years. Discussion topics at the meetings thus far have included mitigation needs, weather monitoring for predicting wildfire risks, response plans, and challenges to local, volunteer firefighters. The task force has narrowed the issues to a number of possible recommendations and will finalize these recommendations in its report this fall.

Several of the tentative recommendations that are under consideration include the expansion of Mesonet and statewide use of the fire danger index, efforts to improve wildfire data with increased reporting, strengthening of mutual aid systems, incentives to support the volunteer firefighter workforce, improved oversight of degraded power lines and poles, expanded access to
grant funds for local entities, expanded support for prescribed burn associations, and increased funding for mitigation and response programs through the Kansas Forest Service.

I’ve been impressed and grateful for the candid, yet cordial, exchange of concerns and suggestions amongst the task force members. It’s obvious to me that these entities have enhanced their collaborations in recent years in response to multiple large-scale wildfires since 2016. I look forward to sharing the final report with the legislature.

Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to join you today and am happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.