Agriculture

Imperial Valley Agriculture

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Summary

The Alamo Canal was completed in 1901 and diverted water from the Colorado River through Mexico for approximately 40 miles before crossing back into the United States (U.S.) east of the city of Calexico. In 1904, floodwaters from the Colorado and the Gila Rivers caused a break in the canal. The resulting floods, over nearly two years, formed the Salton Sea. To the present time, the Salton Sea continues to serve as an agricultural drainage basin.

Since its very beginning, the Imperial Valley has had an agricultural-based economy. The Imperial Valley forms the southeast anchor of California, bordering on Arizona to the east, Mexico on the south, San Diego to the west and Riverside County to the north. The terrain varies from 235 feet below sea level at the Salton Sea to 4,548 feet at Blue Angel Peak. The climate is hot and dry. Temperatures range from lows in the mid 30's in January to highs above 110 in July and August. Annual rainfall is just above 2 inches and average humidity is 25%.

The desert areas of southern California provide a very significant component of California's and U.S.'s agricultural production. Imperial County, in 1999, accounted for over one billion dollars in gross income to agricultural producers; this ranks tenth among all California counties. Imperial County has more acreage and production of alfalfa than any other county in the U.S. It is also a major producer of lettuce, feedlot beef, melons, carrots, sudan grass hay, onions and numerous other commodities.

A strong interdependency among the many agricultural industries exists. The Chino dairy industry of Los Angeles/San Bernardino/Riverside Counties depends on the close proximity and year-round supply of quality alfalfa forage from the Imperial Valley. The vegetable, cereal grain, and cotton crops provide important rotational options important to sustaining the soil and reducing pest problems. Every plant and animal commodity is dependent upon water.
Arid lands, with the introduction of water, create a climate unsurpassed for the production of foods and fiber. Unfortunately, with this same climate, the insect population can increase dramatically. With the warm weather and nonstop production that is found in desert agriculture, the insect world can reproduce at a rate six to eight times as fast as in other areas.

Approximately 480,000 acres of land are farmed in the Imperial Valley. Total farmable acres have remained fairly constant over the past decade. More than 40 types of crops and commodities grown in the Imperial Valley had a gross value of over one million dollars in 1999.