Livestock in the Imperial Valley

The Importance of Livestock and Forage Production to Imperial Valley Agriculture

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Abstract

Of all the individual agricultural commodities in Imperial County, the livestock industry generally ranks first among all the individual commodities, usually from 20 to 30% of total agricultural sales. In Imperial County, the livestock industry consists of winter lamb grazing, two dairies, and the major component, cattle feedlots. California ranks sixth in the US in number of fed cattle, with Imperial County having the greatest number of feedlot cattle among California counties. On a yearly basis, about 450,000 head of cattle are fed in Imperial County feedlots.

During the 1920’s and 30’s, Imperial County was the number one dairy county in California. Today only two dairies remain. As late as the 1960’s, there were more than 20 abattoirs in Los Angeles, today only one abattoir remains in Los Angeles for Imperial County fed cattle to be processed. Additionally, one abattoir is located in Tolleson, Arizona, where the majority of Imperial County fed cattle are processed. The lack of slaughter facilities in Southern California and diminished Southern California dairy cattle numbers are a grave concern for Imperial Valley agriculture and are considered to be one of the major constraints of agricultural expansion in Imperial County. The County of Imperial, together with a committee of concerned citizens is currently attempting to assist the agricultural community to resolve these problems.

Of the almost ½ million acres under cultivation in the Imperial Valley, about 40 to 45% of the total acreage is in alfalfa. About 80% of the alfalfa hay goes to the China dairies, about 10% of the hay goes to local feedlots, about 5% is exported, and about 5% goes to the horse market. Every year for the last decade, about 40,000 to 80,000 acres of sudan grass are grown for hay. Most of the sudan grass hay is exported to Japanese dairies. Additionally, about 25,000 to 40,000 acres of Bermuda grass are cultivated in the Imperial Valley. Depending upon the Bermuda grass variety and on hay prices, the Bermuda grass is either grown for
seed or for hay. As is readily evident forage crop production occupies almost 75% of all the cultivated acreage in Imperial County. Forage crop production uses the vast majority of imported Colorado River water, the majority of pesticides, and contributes the majority of surface water runoff in polluted agricultural drains. The importance of forage crop production to Imperial Valley agriculture cannot be understated.