

Summit to focus on agricultural offerings

Growers played \$425 million role in the valley's economy last year

By LOU HIRSH
THE DESERT SUN

COACHELLA — Rising costs, increased foreign competition and encroachment of housing development are among key issues weighing on the minds of Coachella Valley agricultural growers these days.

Those will be discussed Thursday at the fifth annual AgSummit in Coachella, being held at Anthony Vineyards and presented by the city of Coachella's Economic Development Department. But event organizers say the emphasis is being placed on what local growers have to offer the public, in spite of the challenges.

The overall theme for the conference — with an expected attendance of about 300 — is "From the Field to the Table for Your Health," featuring a panel led by valley family farmers. Local chefs will present a demonstration of cooking with locally grown products.

AWARENESS: Event organizers say the main purpose of the annual summit is raising public awareness about an economic powerhouse that many valley residents may not know is in their backyard. One goal is spreading the message that consumer choices made at the grocery store also impact the health of the local economy.

"We wanted to get the word out to the rest of the valley about all that is grown out here in the east valley," said Lorie Williams, chairman of the summit organizing committee, who is also a redevelopment director with the city of Coachella.

The valley's agricultural



TAYA KASHUBA, THE DESERT SUN

New homes at Tierra del Sol are being built on Avenue 48 near the intersection of Jackson Street in Coachella. The rapid growth of new housing developments in east valley communities like Indio, Coachella and La Quinta pose substantial challenges to the valley's agricultural community.

Surveying the landscape

These were among responses given by about 100 Coachella Valley growers to a recent survey by Best Best & Krieger, in advance of this year's agricultural summit.

1. What are your expectations for overall financial results for 2003, compared with 2002?

Will improve	23 percent	
Will decline	42 percent	
Will stay the same	36 percent	

2. Reasons for improvement (multiple responses allowed):

Increased sales or output	88 percent	
Addition of product or service lines	38 percent	
Decreased operating costs	25 percent	
Merger or acquisition	13 percent	

3. Reasons for decline (multiple responses allowed):

Increased operating costs	92 percent	
Increased foreign competition	61 percent	
Decreased sales	38 percent	
Increased domestic competition	31 percent	
Decreased consumer spending	23 percent	

4. How do you feel the pace of development is proceeding in the Coachella Valley?

Too rapid	60 percent	
Just right	33 percent	
Too slow	7 percent	

5. What are your most pressing business concerns? (Multiple responses allowed)

Government regulations	47 percent	
Labor costs	33 percent	
Local economy	20 percent	
Increasing sales/market share	20 percent	
Water issues	17 percent	
Increased foreign competition	17 percent	
State economy	10 percent	

SOURCE: BEST BEST & KRIEGER LLP

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industry, which grows dozens of products ranging from dates and table

peppers, last year generated more than \$425 million in total revenues. Agriculture, in fact, is second only

to tourism as a regular economic force in the valley.

But Williams said growers are faced with a num-

If you go

What: Coachella Valley AgSummit 5

When: Thursday, Nov. 13, 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Where: Anthony Vineyards, 52-301 Enterprise Way, Coachella

Keynote speaker: PBS host Huell Howser

Information or reservations (\$25): City of Coachella Economic Development Department, 398-3502, Ext. 233; www.agsummit.org

ber of issues making them question the future viability of local farming, not the least of which is the rapid growth of new housing development in east valley communities like Indio, Coachella and La Quinta. **DEVELOPMENT:** "So much of the acreage out here is being bought up by developers who are building houses on it," Williams said.

A survey done for the conference by the law firm Best Best & Krieger LLP indicates that growers are **Please see SUMMIT, E3**