



PHOTOS BY RANDY HOEFT/YUMA SUN

ABOVE: FORTUNATELY, THE COVID-19 pandemic hit toward the end of the agriculture season in Yuma. But the new season has brought with it a new set of problems evolving around planting schedules. When a farmer plants a crop, it doesn't go to market for three months. So in essence, farmers need to guess how much demand the market will have for that crop.

RIGHT: AN IRRIGATOR ADJUSTS the sprinklers on a field. Agriculture experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic almost immediately since about half of the crops go to the food service industry, which includes restaurants, hotels, airlines, schools and convention centers, industries greatly affected by the pandemic.



Plowing ahead

Pandemic impacts agriculture, but industry makes adjustments

BY MARA KNAUB
SUN STAFF WRITER

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the September-October edition of BIZ Magazine, a publication of the Yuma Sun.

Like most businesses, the agricultural industry has had to make adjustments in dealing with the changing circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Paul Brierley, executive director of the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture, shared some of the issues that the agriculture industry has faced during the health crisis. "Like everything else,



THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY required a lot of flexibility because things changed so dramatically, according to Paul Brierley, executive director of the Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Agriculture.

it's been unsettling. It's required a lot of flexibility because things changed so dramatically," Brierley said.

The pandemic largely impacted two areas: the

fresh produce markets and the labor force. The markets control the demand for different types of produce, and the workforce harvests the produce that needs to get to the markets.

Agriculture experienced the effects of the pandemic almost immediately. About half of the crops go to the food service industry, which includes restaurants, hotels, airlines, schools and convention centers.

States at one point or another instituted lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Even before the government orders went out, some people were afraid to eat out or be in crowds, affecting the demand in the food service industry. Then, with the orders, restaurants across the nation either closed or only served takeout or delivery. Travel restrictions meant airplanes were grounded and hotels lost reservations and guests.

Schools closed down before the end of the last academic year, and even now, with some opting for virtual teaching, it's uncertain if and when schools across the country will resume in-person. "That all just stopped,

about half of what is produced," Brierley explained. "That market dried up overnight, and then the retail market, everyone started buying because they were eating at home. The market was not set up to handle that."

The ag industry serves the food service market differently than it does the retail market, where households buy their food. A restaurant or hotel that orders lettuce will receive it in 50-pound bags, much bigger than the half-pound bag available at grocery stores.

Although growers had the lettuce - it was already growing in the field and ready to harvest - they didn't have retail market contracts in place. "So the store had empty shelves," Brierley noted. "Yet fields had to be plowed under because there was no way to get it to the market. That was really frustrating."

This also happened with milk, although Brierley

is not sure if it happened in Yuma, but in Phoenix millions of pounds of milk were dumped every day for the same reason.

"The cows are producing. You can't put it in a silo," he noted. "Yet if you and I went to the store, we could only buy one gallon of milk at a time and one bottle of yogurt."

People started eating more at home and buying more fresh vegetables for their home cooking. With the food service industry dried up and the retail market booming, agriculture had to adjust to this new reality.

"It took a while to adjust the supply chain, to the reality of people cooking in their own kitchens. Over time, though, it turns out, by and large, vegetables seem to be selling more than a year ago. So I guess people are eating healthy at home," Brierley said.

The sales of fruit and vegetables have gone up 15% from a year ago. "It's

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Rise Pelvic Therapy now serving patients

Dr. Sweidan, midwife Strom, Desert Olive Farms move to new locations

I took a little break last week and enjoyed a few days of rest. Now that I'm back, I have more business "comings and goings" to report.

Lauri Stumph, a pelvic floor occupational therapist, recently opened a new clinic in town, Rise Pelvic Therapy and Wellness at 1380 S. Castle Dome Ave., Suite 104.

"I'm the first and only pelvic floor occupational therapist to serve the Yuma area," Stumph said, noting that patients have been going to San Diego or Phoenix if they were receiving pelvic therapy at all.

"I've worked as a seasonal health care



Comings and Goings
Mara Knab

provider here for the past four winters at local rehab facilities, and my husband and I decided to make it permanent this last year after realizing this gap in care here in Yuma," Stumph explained.

She had originally planned to open in March, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, she opened just a couple months ago and has been slowly getting her name out within the community. She hopes to provide small informational sessions soon around the community and in her clinic, when it is safe to do so.

After Stumph shared news of her new business, I had one question: What is pelvic therapy?

"I treat the things people either don't talk about or consider a normal part of



LAURI STUMPH
LOANED PHOTO

having a child or aging, etc., neither of which is true," she said.

People who visit Stumph might have said, "I quit going to the gym because I leak" or "Pelvic pain is affecting my relationship."

She treats bladder and bowel dysfunction including incontinence (leaking urine, stool), urinary urgency and frequency, constipation, overactive bladder and interstitial cystitis (painful bladder

syndrome). She also treats general pelvic pain, pain with sex and tailbone pain.

She works with pregnant women who are experiencing pain and postpartum moms who need pelvic floor rehab, such as scar management, pelvic floor and core strengthening, a safe return-to-exercise program. She also treats diastasis recti, which is very common during and following pregnancy.

Her website www.risepelvictherapy.com has more details as well if you need more information. To reach Rise Pelvic Therapy & Wellness, call 928-605-7070.

I have a couple of moves to report. Dr. Dania Sweidan and Sarah Strom, certified nurse midwife, recently moved from Women's Health Tuscan Plaza, 2851 S. Avenue B, Building 6,

to the Yuma Regional Medical Center Women's Health Center, 2911 S. 8th Ave.

They started seeing patients in their new location starting on Tuesday, Sept. 8.

To reach the YRMC Women's Health Center, call 928-785-3050.



DR. DANIA SWEIDAN AND SARAH STROM
LOANED PHOTOS

Desert Olive Farms, 224 S. Main St., has moved across the alley from Suite 106 to Suite 103. Grace Edgar, who lives in Brawley, California, runs Desert Olive Farms

with her husband, "Cowboy Clyde." They produce their extra virgin olive oil in Imperial Valley and sell it in their downtown Yuma store.

The gourmet kitchen store also offers olives, oils and specialty vinegar, "all grown by us," as well as pasta, teas, napkins, soaps, lotions, candles, gifts and "everything you would need to throw a great little party." She also puts together gift baskets.

Desert Olive Farms will celebrate the grand opening of the new shop with "food and fun" on First Friday, Oct. 2. For more information, call the store at 602-418-6825.

I also have a couple of project updates. Have you noticed that construction of the Dairy Queen being built in the Foothills has resumed? I have received several

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Army converges on Yuma Proving Ground

US. Army Yuma Proving Ground (YPG) is at the forefront of Army modernization efforts is particularly noticeable now.

The first contingent of hundreds of personnel arriving in support of the Army's top capabilities demonstration of the year arrived on post the week of Aug. 9.

YPG was quick to distinguish itself with the U.S. Army Futures Command (AFC) shortly after it was stood up two years ago. To help create the force of the future, AFC divided the Army's top modernization priorities into eight different cross-functional teams (CFTs). Development testing at YPG actively supports six CFTs.

Given this and the confidence the Department of the Army had in YPG and its personnel, the post was slated as a venue for a large capabilities demonstration connected with Project Convergence (PC), the campaign of learning designed to advance and integrate the Army's contribution to the developing concept of Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control.

A daylong demonstration of equipment from five of the CFTs working in tandem will draw the rapid attention of Army senior leaders, congressional representatives,



Yuma Proving Ground
Mark Schauer

and national media outlets later this week.

"That demonstration will bring all the pieces together and see how we can shorten the decision cycle through artificial intelligence at the tactical edge," said Gen. Joseph Martin, vice chief of staff of the Army, in remarks at a media engagement at YPG on March 6.

"Project Convergence will allow us to develop efforts and capability to out-pace our adversaries."

With hundreds of support personnel arriving from all over the Department of the Army to support the exercise, safely in-processing the visitors took the efforts of multiple personnel within YPG, including the YPG Health Clinic and the YPG Police Department. Upon arrival, the visitors were queued for a COVID screening and received their access badges without having to leave their car.

"We go through the list of questions that we normally ask at our access control points," said Savannah Silva, COVID-19 implementation lead. "On top of that, we added a temperature check



LOANED PHOTO

U.S. ARMY Yuma Proving Ground is currently hosting the largest Army capabilities demonstration of the year. The capstone event of Project Convergence, the campaign to generate transformational change to ensure the U.S. Army stays ahead of emerging challenges to national security, has brought hundreds of visitors and support personnel from across the country to YPG.

for the individuals."

To protect both YPG's resident workforce and the hundreds of visiting personnel, a key safety concept was keeping those directly supporting Project Convergence in so-called 'bubbles' that were separate from each other. Visitors working on Project Convergence remained in several remote locations around YPG's vast ranges during duty hours, and were asked to restrict their off-duty activities to only essentials like grocery shopping or purchasing gasoline. Three weeks into the experience, the health of

all concerned demonstrated the success of the effort.

"I think people understand that they could compromise the bubble and negatively impact the project if they aren't responsible," said Silva. "People have been more than willing to help out as much as possible."

Both the visitors and the YPG personnel directly supporting the effort were also required to take a COVID test upon arrival, as well as periodically throughout the duration of their weeklong stay here. The YPG Health Clinic had responsibility for

the effort over the course of weeks. Not seen by most was the intensive and time-sensitive administrative tasks associated with planning the collection process and preparing the samples for testing by an outside facility.

"Whether it is working on-site or working the administrative side, everyone in the clinic has had a hand in supporting this," said Staff Sgt. Selina Strawn, medic. "We still have all of the clinic's normal duties to take care of as well."

Like all personnel at YPG since the earliest days of the COVID pandemic, those here in support of Project Convergence are required to use standard YPG COVID-19 mitigation measures such as face coverings, social distancing where practical, and increased cleaning and hygiene measures in work spaces. Silva feels the successful process is an example of the innovative and resourceful culture that YPG has long been known for.

"We started from a framework that didn't really exist beyond the CDC guidelines," she said. "We've had to design, implement, evaluate, and refine an entire framework. By doing so, we are creating a standard that will be mimicked within other organizations."

Mark Schauer is the public affairs officer at the US Army Yuma Proving Ground.

PLOWING

FROM PAGE B1

actually looking better. It was a scary time when it first happened," he added.

Fortunately, the pandemic hit toward the end of the agriculture season in Yuma. But the new planting season brings with it a new set of problems evolving around planting schedules.

When a farmer plants a crop, it doesn't go to market for three months. So in essence, Brierley said, farmers need crystal balls to guess how much demand the market will have for that crop.

Will airlines be picking back up? Will hotels open? Will there be conventions? Will schools open? Any of these would drastically change the demand.

"They're having to take their best guesses, and they're waiting until the last minute," Brierley said.

The pandemic hit Yuma toward the end of the last season so fewer crews were working the fields. This meant that more buses could be used to run the workforce to and from the fields. They ran more buses with every other seat occupied, and seats were assigned to ensure the same person always sat in the same seat.

Extra hand-washing stations and outhouses

put in their orders. Brierley knows of one farmer who took a last-minute flight to Salinas, California, to tie down a contract because the shipper wouldn't commit. He had waited as long as he could.

Once a shipper signs the contract saying it needs, for instance, a thousand acres of head lettuce and 750 acres of romaine lettuce, the farmer can decide what fields to use and how much to plant.

LOOKING OUT FOR THE SAFETY OF WORKERS

And, again, just like other industries, agriculture has modified the way things are done to keep safety in mind.

"Just like all the other industries, they've had to do the best they can to keep the workers safe," Brierley said.

The pandemic hit Yuma toward the end of the last season so fewer crews were working the fields. This meant that more buses could be used to run the workforce to and from the fields. They ran more buses with every other seat occupied, and seats were assigned to ensure the same person always sat in the same seat.

Extra hand-washing stations and outhouses

were installed so workers wouldn't congregate around those facilities.

Safety precautions were also put into place in the fields, including plexiglass shields and making sure that personal protective equipment, such as face coverings and gloves, was being used.

However, wearing face coverings, gloves and hairnets while picking the fields is nothing new to fieldworkers.

"Agriculture is so attuned to food safety procedures that we're kind of ahead of the game. We already follow so many safety procedures because of the concerns with food safety. So that has helped. To some extent it wasn't a huge shift," Brierley pointed out.

Another issue was ensuring that enough workers were available. This became an issue because some workers feared going to work and getting the infection. The enhanced federal unemployment pay also enticed some workers.

"Some would choose the employment benefits instead of coming to work. So it was difficult to get enough workers in the fields," Brierley said.

Another concern centered on border closures, with the ports closed



PHOTOS BY RANDY HOEFT/YUMA SUN

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS designed to protect workers were put into place in the fields, including making sure that personal protective equipment, such as face coverings and gloves, was being used. However, wearing face coverings, gloves and hairnets while picking the fields is nothing new to fieldworkers.

to nonessential traffic. Fortunately, agriculture has been designated as an essential industry, so it is not subject to the travel restrictions. Workers have always been able to get across the border, but some were nervous, especially when a politician would threaten to close the border.

"They always worry, will the workers be able to get across?" Brierley noted.

Still another worry was the visa programs that workers use to get permission to enter and work in the country. The visas are processed by various government departments, including the embassies and the consulates in Mexico and Guatemala. At one point the U.S. government wasn't sure if it could keep those open in the middle of a pandemic, and that would have affected next season's supply.

"That didn't come to bear. It was a concern. Our concerns were registered, and they were able to keep them open," Brierley said. The Yuma Center of Excellence for Desert Ag-

riculture, which is part of the University of Arizona, is now looking into another possible way to protect the agriculture workforce.

Brierley explained: "The Yuma Center of Excellence is exploring the establishment of a Yuma laboratory that would utilize University of Arizona technology to test sewage as an advance warning of COVID-19 infection occurring in a population such as a farm labor crew."

"If established as a pilot project in Yuma, the system could be utilized by municipalities, schools and military installations to track and slow the spread of the virus. If successful here, it could be replicated elsewhere."

If successful, this kind of testing would give a seven-day advance warning of infections.

"We've been doing a lot of interesting research on the coronavirus. So we're going to do everything we can to bring some of those technologies to the community, to be able to have better testing."

The proposed project is made possible by a

donation that specified that it go toward COVID-19 research. The proposal is garnering support.

"In a conversation with a local mayor, Brierley quoted the mayor as saying something to the effect of 'we want to do anything we can to help protect Yuma's ag workforce, because they're not only our citizens and neighbors but also the backbone of our economy.'"

"The point being," Brierley added, "if we can get some technologies here to help and the communities can help support those efforts, we'll keep the ag workforce safe, and so they might be useful to the communities also."

As an industry designated as critical, agriculture will keep moving forward "because everyone continues to eat," Brierley quipped.

"We're hoping people gain an appreciation for these people that are farming and working in the fields and putting food on the table. They're essential workers, and they're working through this pandemic," he added.



THE PANDEMIC HIT Yuma towards the end of the last season so less crews were working the fields. This meant that more buses could be used to run the workforce to and from the fields, with every other seat occupied and seats assigned so the same person always sat in the same seat.

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PROPOSED BUDGET
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For year ending December 31, 2021

SALARIES AND WAGES	4,107,000
EQUIPMENT EXPENSE	595,000
EQUIPMENT PURCHASE	100,000
HERBICIDES	65,000
UTILITIES	425,000
METROPOLITAN IRRIGATION DISTRICT	506,300
CALIFORNIA EXPENSES (MTRLS ONLY)	14,000
OPERATIONAL MATERIAL EXPENSES	597,000
PAYROLL TAXES & BENEFITS	1,424,000
GENERAL (INS-LEGAL-AUDIT)	452,000
ADMINISTRATIVE	121,000
HEADQUARTERS GROUNDS & MISC	61,000
TOTAL BUDGETED EXPENSES	8,467,300
Direct Assessment (49,727 @ \$107.00)	5,320,789
Converted M&I Assessment (3,874 @ \$124.76)	483,320
Projected Miscellaneous/Other Revenues:	2,663,191
Reimbursable work, power income, surcharges, additional water, city water and general funds.	
SPECIAL ASSESSMENT YEAR 2021:	
ADDITIONAL \$5.00 PER ACTUAL ACREAGE	263,500