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Experts Weigh In on Climate Change

By Mark Parker

The impact of climate change on agriculture was brought into focus recently as experts discussed the topic at the Connecting Cows, Carbon & Carrots conference, sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center, that brought 150 people to Emporia, Kansas.

In a panel discussion, Region VII EPA Director Pat Brooks, National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) Policy Analyst Jeff Schahczenski, and USDA-NRCS Rangeland Ecologist Joel Brown shared their views on climate change issues.

While it may be possible to dramatically change how energy sources and consumption affect climate, Schahczenski said, current politics make that an unlikely scenario. Asserting that agriculture should not be blamed for globally increasing greenhouse gas emissions, he said that the industry does have potential to help mitigate their effects.

Within agriculture, Schahczenski observed, soil and livestock management are the two biggest factors. His suggestions for reducing agriculture's impact on climate change include improved energy efficiency, more efficient use of synthetic fertilizers, a reintegration of livestock manure and green manure crops in fertility management, federal conservation program participation and a movement toward farms providing their own liquid fuels from their own crops.

"Some people say they don't believe in climate change," Schahczenski said. "Climate change is not a matter of belief ... The best science we have suggests something is going on here. We can argue about the details but not the facts."

Discussing the EPA's role in regulations relating to climate change, Brooks acknowledged that the agency's relationship with agriculture has been, at times, "frosty." He said that although EPA's interaction with agriculture regarding greenhouse gases has been very limited, Congress has charged the agency to enforce the Clean Air Act and a 2007 Supreme Court decision dictates that greenhouse gases be included in that enforcement.

Asked by Kansas Rural Center Executive Director Dan Nagengast if prescribed burning in the Flint Hills is a thing of the past, Brooks said, "No, of course not." He did say, however, that it must be recognized that traditional burning has a measurable impact on human health despite the fact that it benefits the native

range and beef production there. He said he is “hopeful” that stakeholders will very soon arrive at a solution, adding that there is “an awful lot of common ground.”

Joel Brown, the event’s keynote speaker, discussed some of his climate change research at USDA’s Jornada Experimental Range in southern New Mexico. While changing farm and ranch management can have a positive environmental effect, he said, it’s important for farmers to access information on adapting to changes in the climate. In addition, he suggested that farmers take advantage of carbon sequestration programs for their financial benefits as well as for their contribution to sustaining ecosystems. Brown’s keynote presentation, as well as other workshop presentations, is available online at www.kansasruralcenter.org

The conference was organized by the Kansas Rural Center, a non-profit organization whose mission is to support sustainable agriculture through public policy as well as by grower and consumer education. The event was held at Flint Hills Technical College in Emporia, where the culinary arts department students provided a meal of all locally-grown food for the 150 participants. -30-