Recent summit at BC discussed ag’s strengths and challenges

When Congressman Kevin McCarthy made his opening remarks at the first-ever Kern Agriculture Summit on October 14, he spoke about how amazing it was that agriculture — arguably the top industry in the valley — had never come together to discuss the matters that affect the valley, state and nation.

These comments, seven months after the planning for the Kern Agriculture Summit began in earnest, struck me deeply. I am an agriculture educator and professional. I see the peaks and valleys in the field every day as I prepare a new crop of students for employment in agriculture.

Looking back, I think about how Bakersfield College recently celebrated 100 years of educational excellence in Kern County, and how coming off that celebration the college saw the need to look forward into the next century and focus on the strengths of the Central Valley. Agriculture plays an essential role in the vibrancy of the San Joaquin Valley, and Kern County is the second largest agricultural producer in the United States. The Bakersfield College agriculture program is one of the nation’s oldest community-college programs, graduating students to jobs across the state, nation and world. We play a vital role in Kern County’s economy and society, and in multiple industries beyond agriculture.

Our president, Dr. Sonya Christian, has a visionary outlook for Bakersfield College’s role in the community. She came to me last year, looking for a way to bring regional agriculture professionals to Bakersfield College for a candid conversation on the issues and trends affecting agriculture. As I worked with a team to make the vision a reality, the seeds were sown for the Kern Agriculture Summit.

Three-hundred-and-eighty days later, the gym at Bakersfield College was filled with agricultural professionals and organization representatives for an enlightening series of presentations on the strength of California agriculture, the challenges facing the industry, and the future predictions for the producers of America’s food and fiber.

Led by keynote speakers of national importance, the summit provided an educational and enriching environment for conversations about what is happening in ag. The hard topics, such as water and immigration, were not ignored, as both Congressman Kevin McCarthy and Sen. Jean Fuller tackled the water bond which was up for vote on election day, and local farmer Greg Wegis told an impassioned story of the personal side of immigration and farm labor.

We were honored to have Karen Ross, Secretary of Agriculture for the California Department of Food and Agriculture, join us for the day. She spoke about the 400 commodities produced in Kern County and California, which is a $33 billion industry. Paul Wegner, president of the California Farm Bureau, echoed Ross’ numbers — California is the No. 1 state in agricultural production. Statistics like these is a reason why Bakersfield College took on the challenge of presenting the Kern Agriculture Summit.

By far, however, water wove deeply into the conversation. Jason Gianquinto, from the Semitropic Water Storage District, explained the challenges of regulatory laws which have prevented redirection of water from the delta to state water supplies. Changes in the crops themselves have occurred because of drought and water restrictions. Harry Cline, from the Western Farm Press, discussed the decline of some crops, such as cotton and alfalfa, due to higher water costs and a trend to grow more permanent lower water-use trees and vines. Eric Averett, with Rosedale-Rio Bravo Storage District, said California’s water woes will result in an estimated loss of 185,200 acres of farmland and 12,400 fewer farm jobs. The economic loss could reach $631 million.

Fuller stressed the need for legislators and voters to understand the importance of California agriculture and the need for water. The November ballot let California voters choose to adopt Proposition 1, which funds water storage projects and provides mechanisms for other water protection. A drive up I-5 is all you need to know to understand how deeply the lack of water is affecting our economy.

Farmers have humbly worked the land, tended to their crops and shaped Kern County into one of the greatest agricultural lands in the world.

Lindsay Ono is a professor of agriculture at Bakersfield College.