

By: Paul Ivce

INDIANTOWN — Access to a legal workforce was the top issues for many of the Treasure Coast ranchers and farmers who aired their concerns to two congressmen on Friday.

About two dozen ranchers, growers and dairymen came to the Sunlight Ranch in western Martin County for a roundtable session held by Florida Farm Credit, the Florida Farm Bureau and U.S. Reps. Allen West, R-Plantation, and Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta.

Rooney was unable to attend because of a prior commitment at a VA clinic in Sebring.

West brought along U.S. Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., a 10-term congressman who is chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

The ranchers and farmers discussed a wide range of topics with the congressmen.

Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League, emphasized the need for the federal government to support research into solutions for the greening and canker diseases that threaten Florida's \$7 billion citrus industry.

Bournique and others mentioned developing plans for better control and storage of freshwater.

Several others mentioned the ever-increasing range of federal regulations that drive up the costs for small businesses.

The loudest echoes of agreement, though, came when Cliff Burg, owner of the Sunlight Ranch

horse farm, said, "I can't hardly find a groom to hire that is legal."

Robert Butler mentioned the difficulty finding legal workers for his 1,400-acre Highlands County dairy farm.

"Everybody I've got is legal; I've got documents," Butler said. "I've been told some of those are counterfeit. I don't want to become a counterfeit expert."

West said, "We can tailor solutions to subsections of an industry, but we cannot allow people to continue to disavow our laws."

Kingston added, "When that anti-immigration movement gets rolling, politically it's very hard to stop."

Roland Yee, owner of Yee Farms Inc., which grows Asian vegetables on 1,000 acres about evenly divided between St. Lucie and Palm Beach counties, said the dumping of produce on the U.S. market by other nations is hurting farmers in Florida and other agricultural states in the South.

Several of the ranchers and farmers said they were impressed by how well West listened and recapped their concerns at the end.

"It was pretty open and freewheeling," said Palm City rancher Rick Hartman. "Everybody got a chance to speak their mind."

Burg, who also owns Fort Pierce-based Indian River Select juice company, said, "I thought it was a great exchange of ideas."

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