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IAS Laboratory owner Daniel McLane shows off a drone he and High Desert Agricultural Consulting owner Jerry Miller use to help farmers detect crop stress at the annual New Mexico Chile Conference at Hotel Encanto.

HOT TOPICS

Pepper gurus talk chile during yearly event

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LAS CRUCES - A yearly gathering attracted about 200 people Tuesday to Las Cruces to trade the latest information about New Mexico's hottest crop.

Chile farmers, processors, vendors and researchers — including some from around the globe — met at Hotel Encanto for the 2016 New Mexico Chile Conference, an event in its 39th year. Attendance was up from last year by about 50 people, said Danise Coon, a conference

organizer and senior research specialist with New Mexico State University's chile-breeding program.

"It's definitely a record year for attendance," she said.

See PEPPER, Page 8A

Pepper

Continued from Page 1A

Coon said she thinks more farmers were attending this year because recent bad weather has kept them out of the fields.

Organizers said the number of vendors — about 20 — was up compared with last year, too.

Though it occupied only a 30-minute slot on Tuesday's conference schedule, a hot topic among attendees in between sessions was an ongoing move toward mechanically harvesting and destemming green chile, processes that are now done by harvest workers in the fields. Destemming is a task needed by food companies that process chile, such as for salsa. A number of industry experts have said the move toward machine harvesting will be critical to prevent a continuing decline in the amount of chile grown in New Mexico.

An international group of inventors who last summer carried out a trial phase of a mechanical harvesting and chile destemming operation in southern New Mexico attended the chile conference on Tuesday. They said they're hearing from producers and processors who are eager to have a chile-harvesting system in place. But they said few people want to invest the resources that will take the project to a commercial scale.

"Everybody wants a solution," said Elad Etgar, Israeli inventor of a green-chile harvesting device. "But nobody wants to be the first to jump."

Etgar said this year, the company is working with the city of Deming to grow green chile on 70 acres provided by the city that would be mechanically harvested and destemmed this summer. The city is involved as part of an economic development project aimed at keeping a local processing company in its area as an employer. And Etgar said his company needs a sizeable plot of chile to continue its field testing of the systems. What's still lacking in the proposal is a farmer who'll provide labor to grow the chile, he said.

"If we get support, we can run this year," he said. "If not, I don't know what we'll do because we invested a lot of money last year."

Etgar said the company hopes to test different chile pepper varieties to find out which are best for mechanical har-

vesting.

Nag Kodali, who invented a green pepper destemming device tested last year in southern New Mexico, also attended Tuesday.

The attempt to mechanically harvest green chile spurred a late morning meeting among growers and industry experts that wasn't listed on the conference agenda. Hatch-area chile farmer Jerry Franzoy said he gained useful information at the meeting, especially about the chile destemming machine. It would be a big shift in the industry, he said.

"It's going to take time, but it has to happen," he said.

Other technology also was featured Tuesday. Attendees heard a presentation about the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, often referred to as drones, for agricultural purposes.

UAVs could help farmers check the status of their chile crop to assess how it's faring, Coon said.

"Growers can get an entire view of their whole field and really see if disease is taking over," she said.

Willis Fedio, director of the NMSU food safety laboratory, presented an overview of new U.S. food safety regulations that will more intensely regulate the dairy and produce industry, including green chile, in coming years. They're aimed at reducing food contamination. He said most of the rules are set to take effect about 2020, but it's important for farmers and processors to begin understanding them — and taking steps to implement them — in the years leading up to that.

"This gives people time," he said.

Fedio said some growers might choose to stop producing rather than adhere to the new regulations. Others will make the changes.

"I know that it's scaring a lot of people," he said. "But if they're going to stay in business in today's world, they're going to have to do that."

Fedio said a key attitude among regulators is that they're seeking to work with the food production industry, not "destroy" it.

Conference organizer Paul Bosland, a regents professor at NMSU and chile-breeding expert, said he was "very pleased" at how the conference turned out.

"It's just incredible that it's still going strong," he said.

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Harris Moran sales executive Mike Cadena, left, fills his plate on Tuesday during the New Mexico Chile Conference at Hotel Encanto. This year's menu, prepared by Hotel Encanto chefs, used a Holy Jolokia chile rub on the meat.