

## 09-28: Water issues on tap for state

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By MELISSA TRESNER

CARTHAGE — Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs is predicting that water rights and access issues will be hot topics in the next legislative session.

Combs was in Carthage on Monday for a town hall meeting. About 60 agricultural and community leaders gathered and asked questions about water-rights issues, including rumors that the state would remove local control of groundwater districts.

"This is going to be a huge water session — very, very important," Combs said, adding that she hasn't heard that rumor.

She said she expects lawmakers to "beef up and tighten up" the rules for groundwater districts while still giving decision-making control to local authorities.

Combs said she supports the formation of groundwater districts, but officials should "be thoughtful, take their time and do it right" when setting regulations and rates. She said water authorities should consider leasing water rights instead of selling them.

The commissioner said urban and rural dwellers are fighting for control of water in some areas of the state. A plentiful and safe water supply is linked to economic development.

"Your town, your county can't thrive, can't grow, if you're out of water," Combs said.

Combs also discussed the agriculture department's ongoing marketing campaigns, such as "Go Texan" and "Yes Texas," which promote the state, its resources and products.

She praised Carthage for its ability to prosper despite its small size. Rural areas are generally seeing a declining population while metropolitan areas continue to grow. Small towns don't have conveniences and amenities like big cities to attract people.

"As you're trying to convince folks to move here, raise their families here, you have a challenge," Combs said.

With the state's public school finance system being declared unconstitutional recently, Combs encouraged people to stay in touch with their state representatives and "be specific because it helps them craft a solution that's acceptable to everyone."

She said the issue affects the agricultural industry because a new system is probably going to shift the burden of paying school taxes.

Combs said politicians have indicated that the agricultural sales tax exemptions and ad valorem tax will stay the same. Farmers don't pay sales tax for seed, for instance, and property taxes for agriculture businesses are based on product value, not market value, which is important because of agriculture's "skinny margins."

She also told the audience to be on the lookout for a new federal system of animal identification. She said the tracking system for sheep, cattle and other herds is expected to be in place at the end of 2005.

Combs mentioned her efforts in combatting childhood obesity by setting new rules for public schools that limit the amount of fried foods and junk food.

"I'm the one whose been very involved that our kids — at least in school — are eating right," she said. The Carthage meeting was one of 15 forums planned by Combs since Sept. 10 to discuss issues impacting rural Texas and the agricultural industry. She also spoke at meetings in Camp, Angelina and Brazoria counties on Monday.