

Monthly Briefing

A Summary of the Alliance's Recent and Upcoming Activities and Important Water News

Alliance Readies Release of 2008 Western Water Policy Report

The Family Farm Alliance has developed policy recommendations and next week will release a detailed policy report to provide the next Administration with guidance on Western agricultural, water resources and environmental matters.

“Earlier this year, we established a subcommittee to address political considerations associated with the upcoming national political conventions, presidential race, and post-election transition,” said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen (OREGON).

This group has conducted several conference calls and

very quickly prioritized development of a policy paper and an executive summary that identify issues of concern to Western family farmers and ranchers.

The result is a 20-page report that details key policy recommendations. The final report entitled “Western Water Policy: Challenges and Opportunities of our Times and our Legacy for the Next Generation” will be publicly released and distributed following next week’s election.

“The report and its recommendations will provide a very useful vehicle to convey our message to our political

leaders,” said Alliance President Patrick O’Toole (WYOMING). The Alliance already distributed several hundred of executive summary brochures to key political leaders at the national political party conventions in Denver and Minneapolis.

“The initial executive summary that we handed out at those events helped establish our credibility,” said O’Toole. “It has already ended up in the hands of many people at different levels on both sides of the political aisle.”

“Our subcommittee really stepped up on this ,” said Keppen.

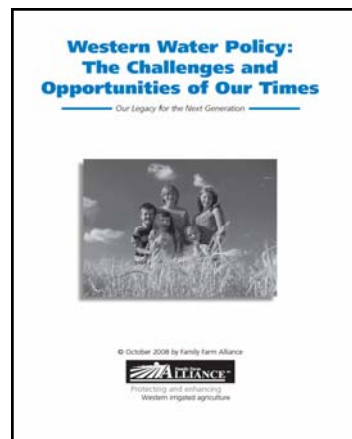


Figure 1: New Family Farm Alliance Policy Report.

PDF printable versions to be made available at www.familyfarmalliance.org

Western Water Policy Rx **2**

Pacific Institute Study Rebutted **2**

Loan Guarantee Rule Out for Review **4**

THANKS to our donors! **5**

STORIES INSIDE **↑**

NW Dam Impacts to Salmon Questioned

A Pacific Northwest study released earlier this month has grabbed the attention of newspapers and scientists with its finding that some endangered Columbia and Snake River Chinook salmon and steelhead smolt survival during migration through the dammed section is higher than in the lower river and estuary where dams are absent. Of particular note,

survival during the downstream migration of endangered salmon and steelhead stocks appears to be as high or higher than that of the same species migrating out of the Fraser River in Canada, which lacks dams.

The report – entitled “Survival of Migrating Salmon Smolts in Large Rivers With and Without Dams” –

was published in the October 2008 edition of *PLoS Biology*, an on-line scientific journal.

The Fraser and Columbia are the two largest rivers on the west coast of North America, home to some of the world’s major salmon runs. However, major declines in abundance of adult salmon returning to the Columbia

[Continued on Page 3](#)

2008 Western Water Policy Recommendations

- The U.S. must adopt an overriding national goal of remaining self-sufficient in food production. Food security is homeland security. Policy decisions on a wide range of issues should then be evaluated to be sure they are consistent with that goal.
- State and local governments must consider the impacts of continued growth that rely on water transfers from agriculture and rural areas and to identify alternatives.
- When water laws and environmental laws conflict, balanced solutions that respect the both the socioeconomic realities of the West and the ecosystem must be found.
- State laws and institutions must be given deference in issues relating to water resource allocation, use, control and transfer.

Source: 2008 Alliance Policy Report (see related story, page 1)

- The best decisions on water issues happen at the state and local level, as “one size fits all” national policies cannot reflect the unique and diverse circumstances encountered throughout the West.
- Aging water infrastructure must be addressed promptly and with priority commitments, as failure do to so will create a failed legacy for the next generation.
- New water supplies must be developed to provide for recreational and environmental needs, allow for population growth and protect the economic vitality of the West.
- Western water research needs must be prioritized and coordinated.
- Real management is needed in the real “reservoir” of the West; our federally-owned forest lands in upper watershed areas.

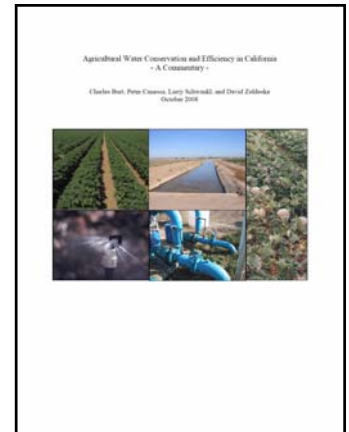


Fig. 2: New Irrigation Report

“We pose a reality check looking at the Tulare Lake and San Joaquin areas alone: If so much water is being wasted as implied by the estimates of potential savings in the PacInst Paper, it would have to be going somewhere. That somewhere could only be into the ground or out through rivers. But we know that there is a huge groundwater overdraft ...and that the San Joaquin River runs dry near Dos Palos in the summer.”

Agricultural Water Conservation and Efficiency in California - A Commentary

Irrigation Specialists Rebut Institute Report

Four renowned specialists with 120 years combined experience in agricultural and landscape irrigation have completed a commentary that finds “incorrect conclusions” were reached in a widely-read report that was released last month by the Pacific Institute.

Agricultural Water Conservation and Efficiency in California - A Commentary – was released in late October by Dr. Charles Burt, Peter Canessa, P.E., Dr. Larry Schwankl, and Dr. David Zoldoske to address some of the key conclusions of the recent Pacific Institute paper entitled *More With Less*. That latter document—released to much media fanfare in September—claims that by changing what crops are grown and how California farmers grow them, the state can achieve “substantial water savings”.

“We four authors took on this task at our own initiative because we sensed that the widely read paper merited some formal technical peer review,” said Dr. Burt, who chairs the

Irrigation Training and Research Center at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. “We hope that this commentary will be looked at as that - a technical peer review, rather than a questioning of the good intentions of the Pacific Institute paper authors.”

The recent commentary finds that certain points in the Pacific Institute paper directly draw incorrect conclusions, or infer incorrect conclusions based on “significant errors in the underlying assumptions.”

“The importance of finding solutions to California’s water problems is so great that we would be remiss if we did not express our reservations,” the authors note.

The commentary addresses key points discussed in the Pacific Institute paper.

First, many of the “new ideas” presented in the Institute paper are not as new as the authors infer, and the commentary suggests that many

California Irrigation Specialists Weigh In On Institute Report

(Continued from Page 2)

of these ideas have been discussed since the early 1980's. The ideas about "more crop per drop", the importance of good on-farm irrigation efficiency, the need for better appropriate water measurement at various levels, and the minimization of art in water management are all ideas for which there has been extensive discussion, investment, and effort.

Second, the commentary warns about the Institute's authors downplaying their own admissions, such as the need for more detailed economic assessments to capture the social, economic, and environmental benefits and costs of the report's projected improvements.

"Without such an assessment, conclusions drawn by the authors of the (Institute) Paper are difficult to support," the commentary notes.

The commentary found that a few of the Institute report's claims are "overly broad and simplistic". For example, Pacific Institute believes that there are substantial volumes of water that could be easily conserved by agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley without reducing acreage, and that this conservation would have no or minimal effect on established economic, cultural and ecological environments. The commentary found no supporting, significant discussion regarding these complexities.

The authors of the commentary recognize that there is insufficient water to meet all of the demands in California as they presently exist, and promote the importance of improved on-farm irrigation management. However, the commentary also emphasizes that techni-

cally correct information must be used to shape future water decisions in California.

"Difficult policy and legal decisions must be and will be made that will impact the environment, lifestyles, and economics of the multiple water stake holders," the commentary concludes. "One cannot make sweeping statements about water and energy conservation without discussing the confounding details".

Water users in California and throughout the West were heartened by the reality check provided by Burt et al.

"California irrigators recognize that water use efficiency is part of the solution needed to address the state's water challenges," said Patrick O'Toole, Family Farm Alliance President. "They have a four-decade track record to prove it. However, additional water use efficiency actions must be coupled with needed improvements in water storage and conveyance. And those actions must be practical, and not lead to further hardship for California's rural communities."

"Statements suggesting a 10-50% potential savings in agricultural water conservation by improving irrigation application systems are a disservice to the people of California because water policy and action programs based on such statements will substantially underestimate the state's needs for future water supplies."

Agricultural Water Conservation and Efficiency in California - A Commentary, citing statements made in a 1982 report prepared by Davenport and Hagen.

NW Salmon / Dam Study

(Continued from Page 1)

have occurred in the past 70 years. Much of the salmon decline from historic abundance occurred as a result of overfishing and habitat loss before 1938, when Bonneville, the first federal dam, became operational. However, continued sharp declines in abundance, particularly after 1977, when the last of the Snake River dams was completed, have focused much attention on the operation of the dams. A total of 13 salmon stocks in the Columbia system are now listed as threatened or endangered, with Snake River spring/summer Chinook and steelhead formally listed as threatened in 1992 and 1997, respectively.

According to the report, there are many similarities between the two river systems, making for an interesting comparison of salmon survival during the freshwa-



Figure 3:
Columbia River salmon swim past Bonneville Dam.

Source: AP

Continued on Page 4

Alliance to Address Loan Guarantee Rule

The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) has published a proposed rule that will establish eligibility criteria and program requirements for loan guarantees authorized by the Rural Water Supply Act, a bill that the Family Farm Alliance actively worked on two years ago.

The Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to issue loan guarantees to assist non-federal borrowers in financing rural water projects, extraordinary maintenance and rehabilitation of Reclamation project facilities, and improvements to infrastructure directly related to a Reclamation project.

Under the proposed rule, Reclamation will only offer loan guarantees to eligible projects that demonstrate they are creditworthy including the ability of the borrower to repay all project financing and pay all other operation, maintenance, and replacement costs of the project facilities.

The proposed Loan Guarantee Rule is available for review and comment through the press release at <http://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/newsrelease/detail.cfm?RecordID=24981>.

"We will be developing a comment letter on these regulations, and we encourage your own organizations to do the same," said Dan Keppen, Family Farm Alliance Executive Director. "As a first step in that direction, we are working with our advocates at The Ferguson Group to create some bullet points that identify some of the key concerns associated with the draft regulations."

Those bullet points and the draft regulations (37 pages) were circulated to the Alliance Advisory Committee earlier this month. The Alliance is asking its members to share specific concerns about the draft rules and the final comment letter will reflect that input.

You can contact Dan Keppen at dankeppen@clearwire.net for further information on this matter.

Deadline for comments on the proposed loan guarantee rule in Nov. 5.

Columbia / Fraser Study

Continued from Page 3

ter phase of the juvenile outmigration in rivers with and without dams.

The mortality of salmon smolts during their migration out of freshwater and into the ocean has been difficult to measure. In the Columbia River, which has an extensive network of hydroelectric dams, the decline in abundance of adult salmon returning from the ocean since the late 1970s has been attributed in large measure to the presence of the dams, although the completion of the hydropower system occurred at the same time as large-scale shifts in ocean climate. The authors of the report in-part measured the survival of salmon smolts during their migration to sea using elements of a large-scale acoustic telemetry system.

The study results suggest that survival through the hydropower system has now increased to levels similar to those experienced in both the undammed lower Columbia River and in the Fraser River, an important finding that was not technically possible before the development of new monitoring technology.

Initial results suggest that the overall migratory survival of salmon smolts in the Columbia and Fraser systems is now similar. This result is surprising, given that dams are often implicated as major barriers to recovery in the Columbia.

"We're not saying that the dams have never had an effect," said David Welch, the lead author of the report told the *Seattle Times*. "What we all have to ask ourselves is, if survival is up to the level of a river that doesn't have dams, then what's causing survival problems?"

The study results raise important questions regarding the factors that are preventing the recovery of salmon stocks in the Columbia and the future health of stocks in the Fraser River. For example, the report notes that the available evidence suggests the common effect of ocean conditions on survival of salmon in both river systems seems likely. Welch and his co-authors suggested that conservation efforts in the Columbia may be better directed towards understanding the effects of hydropower system passage on ocean survival, in addition to the extraction of small gains in survival at the dams.

"We're not saying that the dams have never had an effect. What we all have to ask ourselves is, if survival is up to the level of a river that doesn't have dams, then what's causing survival problems?"

David Welch, quoted in the *Seattle Times*.

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