

A Wake Up Call for America

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We are part of historic times in the West.

In the bigger picture, urbanization and competition for water supplies are driving Western farmers off the land at a time when American food production in general is following other industries “off-shore” in search of lower costs. Traditional farms and ranches are disappearing, and this year our country will become a net importer of food for the first time in history.

While you’d think that this fact would jolt every serious thinking person awake, there has been remarkably little publicity surrounding this issue. Notably absent in media treatment of this topic is any consideration of the impacts on agriculture (and thus the nation) of increased reallocation and regulation of irrigation water supplies and the associated reduction of irrigated farmland.

The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. The post 9/11 world of terrorist threats makes the stability of domestic food supply even more pressing. For farmers to survive; for food to be produced in America; a stable water supply must be available to grow food. We cannot continue long-term hypothetical processes that focus primarily on continued conservation and downsizing of Western agriculture.

Western farmers, ranchers and water managers are getting nervous. To them, it’s clear that current federal policy is inconsistent with reliable long term domestic agriculture and food production. They believe it’s time for serious public consideration of the question of whether domestic food production is in our national interest. And judging from the results of a recent public poll conducted in one state, policy officials may find a surprising level of support from the general public for this issue.

Colorado State University in June released the results of a poll, which were remarkable for the strong support average citizens gave agriculture in that state. For example, agriculture was seen as the most important economic sector in Colorado, beating out tourism & recreation, high tech industries, and mining and petroleum. Nearly all respondents (96.8%) felt that maintaining agricultural land and water in agricultural production was “very” or “moderately” important. And, notably, nearly 3 of 4 respondents indicated that agriculture should be the top priority for water allocation in dry years, as compared to 1 in 5 respondents who said in-stream flow levels should be top priority.

Our leaders must help answer the questions Western irrigators are asking: Is irrigated agriculture a national security interest we want to protect? If yes, then how do we protect that interest while addressing water quality, environmental and sustainability issues?

As a first step towards trying to provide answers to these questions, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other federal agencies need to take a hard look at the status of Western irrigated agriculture. I have heard many anecdotal accounts from Western irrigators of agricultural lands being converted to residential and commercial development and of agricultural water being used (transferred or bought) to support these new demands.

This is happening in every state, but irrigators in Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and California are especially nervous. A report released in April by Environment Colorado found that, from 1987-2002, Colorado lost an average of 460 acres per day of agricultural land. The report predicts 3.1 million more acres will be lost to development by 2022. Arizona's Salt River Project (SRP) is the "poster child" for transfers of agricultural water to urban areas. In a few years, the SRP will cease to provide water to agriculture in order to meet new demands exerted by development. In Las Vegas, over 70,000 new residents are moving in every year, and Southern Nevada Water Authority is looking to rural areas to satisfy its growing thirst. California remains the most populous state in the nation, with over 36 million people calling it home, and more arriving every year.

While these types of facts may help grab the attention of some observers, a much larger, comprehensive study would provide hard findings – as opposed to anecdotal evidence - that should shake policy makers awake on the "big picture" ramifications of this issue.

Maybe this type of information will finally jolt our leaders awake to the realization that Western irrigated agriculture is a strategic national resource, and the role of the federal government in the 21st Century should be to protect and enhance that resource.

July 13, 2006