

## **Anyone Looking at the Bigger Picture?**

By Dan Keppen  
Family Farm Alliance

Family farms and ranches are experiencing a crisis in numbers. According to Farm Aid, in the 1930s, there were close to seven million farms in the United States. Today, just over two million farms remain. Of the remaining farms, roughly 565,000 are family operations, farming just over 415 million acres or 44 percent of total farmland. And 330 farm operators leave their land every week.

One of the most troubling aspects of the on-going farm crisis is the decline in the number of young farmers entering the field. More than half of today's farmers are between the ages of 45 and 64, and only six percent of our farmers are younger than 35. Both statistically and anecdotally, for the first time in many generations we see sons and daughters of farmers opting to leave the family farm because of uncertainty about agriculture as a career.

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 actually become a net importer of food, drawing frightening parallels to our dependence on foreign sources of energy.

Meanwhile, according to USDA's Economic Research Service statistics for 2005, Americans are spending, on average, 9.9 percent of their disposable income on food. To put this into perspective, just 70 years ago, the figure was more than 25 percent. So, while more, better and safer food is being produced by our farmers, they continue to feel the pinch – and it is only a matter of time before that pinch translates itself back into the supermarket.

Ironically, it is because Western irrigated agriculture has been so adaptive and successful at providing plentiful, safe and affordable food that it is now jeopardized – nobody believes there can be a problem. The last Americans to experience food shortages are members of the so-called Greatest Generation and their parents. For the most part, they have left us, taking with them the memories of empty supermarket shelves. When the issue has never been personalized, it's easy to be complacent.

We have heard many anecdotal accounts from Western farmers and ranchers of important agricultural lands being converted to residential and commercial development and of agricultural water being used (transferred or bought) to support these new demands. New environmental water demands imposed by regulatory agencies or courts also first look to

agriculture. This is happening in every state, but farmers and ranchers point to some striking examples:

- A report released in April by Environment Colorado found that, from 1987-2002, Colorado lost an average of 460 acres per day of ag 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, Nevada, 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.

We cannot continue long-term hypothetical processes that focus primarily on continued conservation and downsizing of Western agriculture. 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.

Outgoing Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson put it bluntly when he said, "I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply, because it is so easy to do." Further, Thompson said he worries "every single night" about threats to the American food supply.

For farmers to survive; for food to be produced in America; a stable water supply must be available. However, the policies of the federal government make development of that water nearly impossible. Water wars are being fought throughout the West simply because we have not had the vision to develop new, environmentally sound, sources of water.

We must stop ignoring the negative implications of reallocating more agricultural water supplies to meet new urban and environmental water demands. At what point will too much agricultural land be taken out of production? Do we want to rely on imported food for safety and security? The Europeans, who have starved within memory, understand the importance of preserving their food production capability. They recognize it for the national security issue that it is.

The leadership in our country also better start taking a hard look at the bigger picture, before it's too late.