

New Western Survey Shows Strong Support for Farm Water

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Colorado State University (CSU) has completed a Westwide (17 states) survey that has been under development for the past year. It finds – throughout the West - strong citizen support for water going to farmers and also strong support for building new water infrastructure. Reagan Waskom, Director of the Colorado Water Institute, rolled out the latest findings at the 21st Annual Family Farm Alliance Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada last March.

“When addressing long-term scarcity, respondents prefer reservoir construction and reuse systems over other acquisitions and, in particular, are not in favor of water transfers from agriculture,” Waskom told the cheering audience at his luncheon presentation.

The report provides very interesting findings that underscore Western householders support for water storage projects and irrigation over environmental and recreational water needs in times of shortage. Three focus groups were used to develop a multi-faceted questionnaire. An Email invitation to an internet survey yielded 6,250 municipal household respondents in 17 Western states.

In response to the question “*In short term scarcity, which water use should receive the highest priority?*”, respondents indicated that household use and water for farming were the clear preferences. The lowest priorities are found for municipal landscaping and for recreation. In facing short-term scarcity, municipal water providers have several options for acquiring or stretching waters supplies. Respondents were asked to rank these strategies. Restricting outdoor watering is the preferred short-term strategy. Permanent water transfers from farms to cities are the lowest ranking strategy, along with draining lakes, charging higher water rates, and limiting habitat projects.

Among Western respondents to the CSU poll, the most popular strategies for meeting long-term needs are to build reservoirs and reuse water, whether it is on private lawns or public landscapes. The least popular alternative is to buy water from farmers.

This new information flies in the face of arguments made by some environmental activist groups and editorial boards of certain Western urban newspapers, who insist that the public shares their view that dams are outdated, monstrous aberrations that should be destroyed. During times of drought, they say, give the water to the fish, which are more important than farmers.

This survey stems from work the Family Farm Alliance started two years ago, when we presented a white paper directly to a USDA Research Advisory Committee in Washington, D.C. At that time, we were encouraged by the release of an earlier CSU study that showed strong support among Colorado residents for water going to agriculture in times of drought. Based on the earlier CSU results, we were confident that similar sentiments would be expressed by others in the West. The West-wide survey was one of the recommendations made in our presentation.

USDA ultimately ended up providing grant money to fund this broader effort by CSU.

The findings in this report should further convince our political leaders to ignore the naysayers and stand up for farming and new water supply enhancement projects.