

Newest Ag Water Conservation Proposal Would Destroy Management Flexibility

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Nearly one year ago, I wrote a column for this paper about a controversial report released by the Pacific Institute, an Oakland think tank. That report - entitled "More with Less" - claimed that by changing what crops are grown and how California farmers grow them, the state can achieve "substantial water savings". Last year's report was later heavily criticized by representatives from major California universities.

Well...not to be deterred, the Institute is back at it, and in July released another report called "Sustaining California Agriculture in an Uncertain Future". If the recommendations from this report are adopted, it predicts reductions in agricultural water use between 4.5 million and 6.0 million acre feet.

That's an enormous amount of water – equivalent to nearly three quarters of all the water used by every city and town and every other industry in California. In fact, it is twenty times more water than any of the other previous analyses of potential agricultural water savings prepared by experts at the University of California and others.

The Institute proposes that these theoretical massive reductions would be achieved in three stages that would be imposed simultaneously in every hydrologic basin of California.

First, "efficient irrigation technology" would replace flood irrigation wherever possible. In an average water year, the Institute estimates this would save 1.1 million acre feet at a cost of \$4.2 billion. That's \$3818 an acre foot for water that currently costs Central Valley farmers \$200 in an average water year. At that rate, it would take a farmer 20 years to break even on the cost of installing this equipment – and the equipment doesn't last that long.

The next stage of conservation would implement "improved irrigation scheduling" that would deliver water to the crops more precisely when needed. These improvements account for 60 percent of the savings the Pacific Institute projects. But the report acknowledges that nearly 80 percent of the state's delivery systems are not designed to operate this way and it is not clear what changes would be needed to make it possible for them to comply.

The third stage proposed by Pacific Institute– "regulated deficit irrigation" – unfortunately, only works on vineyards and some orchard crops during specific points in the growing season.

Although these proposed restrictions would apply equally to farmers in the Delta, Sacramento Valley, Tulare Basin, Coastal California and the Imperial and Coachella Valleys, fully one third of all the water savings in an average year would come from only one of the state's ten hydrologic regions, the San Joaquin Valley.

Farmers use more water than residential and most industrial water users and have a much wider range of choices as to the crops they select to produce and the volumes and scheduling of the water they need. It is this flexibility in the application of such a large part of the state's overall water use that has enabled California to survive periodic droughts without greater hardship. But the Pacific Institute's vision of the future sacrifices this flexibility in favor of a rigidly managed regulatory system that would limit access, reduce the availability of water, and restrict the opportunities for water users to respond to changing conditions. As a result, water shortages will not only occur more frequently but they will also be more damaging.

Water efficiency proposals must be grounded in reality before they are quickly accepted by policy makers and the media. Like a three-legged stool that's missing a leg, the Pacific Institute's water policy is drastically skewed.