

## **Ranchers, Conservationists & Urban Water Users Partner Up in the Colorado River Basin**

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My organization has been involved for the past year or so in an effort by the so-called “Agricultural/ Urban/Environmental Water Sharing Work Group” to seek the most effective and innovative ways Colorado River water can be shared for mutual benefit, without damaging agriculture or rural communities. This collaborative effort between diverse stakeholders intends to pinpoint obstacles to sharing, and to develop strategies to alleviate obstacles.

I see two key items that we can address through this forum. The first is regulatory reform to facilitate development of new water supplies, and the second is development of a set of principles to guide ag-to-urban water transfers.

Rapid population growth, urbanization and increased competition for water in the West have created significant pressures on certain agricultural sectors. Agriculture holds the most senior water rights in the West and is considered a likely source of water to meet growing municipal and environmental demands. This water is an easy target, because farmers are facing unstable commodity prices. The aging farmer population is marked by those with heirs who have little economic incentive to farm, which means that agricultural water is a highly valuable asset for funding retirement and college educations.

Without new sources of water, the rapid population growth in the West, coupled with increasing environmental demands, will deplete existing agricultural supplies and seriously threaten the future of Western irrigated agriculture. The often slow and cumbersome federal regulatory process is a major obstacle to the realization of projects and actions that could enhance Western water supplies. To that end, the Family Farm Alliance wants to work with federal agencies and other interested parties to build a consensus to streamline the regulatory process. During the past five years, the Alliance has held numerous meetings with federal agencies in an effort to 1) ascertain their interest in regulatory reform, and 2) develop a framework for a process to bring about reform. We have been pleased to find that almost without exception the agencies agree that some form of regulatory streamlining is needed.

I am hoping that this Colorado River forum will provide the framework for engaging federal agencies and other parties, including urban water users and conservation organizations, in a constructive discussion about regulatory reform.

The dry-year transfers of water from agricultural uses to urban uses can be a valuable tool for addressing local water management and supply issues. At the same time, we are gravely concerned about the rapid urbanization of agricultural land and water supplies, which is an issue of national importance. Developing a set of principles would help guide state and local decision makers contemplating water transfers as a means of meeting local supply needs. The goal of such a document would be to provide local authorities with a blueprint for minimizing controversy surrounding water transfers by avoiding or reducing impacts on rural communities.

In my view, these two initiatives – better streamlined regulations and sound principles to guide water transfers - must be coupled for success to be achieved in either area.