

Climate Change Another Potential Stressor to Western Irrigated Agriculture

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As a graduate student studying water resources engineering at Oregon State University in the late 1980's, I never would have guessed that I would one day become so immersed in "global warming" issues. I remember getting my first taste of eco-hysteria when *Time* magazine in 1988 featured a doomed, slowly cooking Earth as its "man of the year", just weeks before Alaska experienced record-breaking cold temperatures. One year later, a U.S. Senator from Tennessee named Albert Gore called for an "International Year of Greenhouse Effect" in anticipation of what he called an "environmental holocaust without precedent."

Now, here we are, nearly 20 years later. Senator Gore – who has since come within a whisker of becoming the president of this country – has won an Oscar for his global warming movie, "An Inconvenient Truth". While I remain skeptical of the near-religious fervor that drives those on the extreme fringe of the global warming debate, I do agree that we are seeing climate trends in the West that deserve attention.

I'm surprised to find that I am also spending a good bit of my time dealing with this issue. For the past year, I've served on a climate change committee in Oregon, and last week, the president of my association – the Family Farm Alliance- was asked to testify at a U.S. Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee hearing on climate change impacts to Western agricultural water supplies.

In the past six months, the public has been inundated with a flood of new studies that focus on projected climate change impacts to Western water resources. Predictions and conclusions reached about the impacts climate change will have on future water resources availability are as varied as the Western landscape. However, we are increasingly hearing reports that predict dire long-term hydrologic consequences for the West.

Within the agricultural community, as in other parts of American society, there are differences of opinion regarding global warming and the role humans play in said warming. However, there is agreement – at least between the directors who serve on the Family Farm Alliance Board – that the climate appears to be warming in many parts of the West. Meanwhile, misleading environmental global warming reports are flying off the presses, and seven congressional committees are addressing this topic in the new Congress. So, this particular issue is one that my board is addressing with priority. We are currently drafting a report on this matter, which Patrick O'Toole previewed at last week's hearing in Washington, D.C.

Pat O'Toole is the president of the Family Farm Alliance. He and his family operate a cattle, sheep and hay ranch in the Little Snake River Valley on the Wyoming-Colorado border. Pat is a former member of Wyoming's House of Representatives and he also served on the federal government's Western Water Policy Review Advisory Commission when Bill Clinton was president.

Mr. O'Toole told the Senate committee that population growth alone is already creating a water supply crisis in the West. He told Senators that many cities are fueling their growth by buying up agricultural land and water. Allowing water-short cities to absorb farmers' water supplies will significantly diminish domestic food production at exactly the same time global warming is predicted to severely adverse impact food production world-wide.

The U.S. has already become a net importer of food. Food production, like so many of our industries and services, is moving offshore, and a large part of our security is moving with it.

Western cities and farms depend on water supplies "stored" in the mountains as snow in the winter to feed streams and rivers and refill reservoirs during the spring and summer when there is little rainfall. However, scientists and government officials told the Senate Committee that global warming could significantly reduce the amount of snow that accumulates in Western mountains, causing potentially severe water shortages.

Western water supplies are already inadequate to the demands of agriculture, urban growth and environmental enhancement. Pat O'Toole called for the expansion of Western water supplies through improvement of existing facilities, better resources management, and the development of new storage projects. Improvement in water conservation and efficiency by urban and agricultural water users also must be part of the solution, he said, but it is simply ludicrous to believe that conservation alone will supply enough water for the tens of millions of new residents expected to arrive in Western cities during the coming decades.

Committee members and witnesses from urban water agencies, conservation groups, and hydroelectric power suppliers joined the Alliance in calling for more research and planning to prepare for the effects of climate change on Western water supplies.

Relying on agriculture to be a shock absorber to soften or eliminate the impending water shortage is not planning. It is a choice to put our heads in the sand and hope for the best.

It is a decision that could worsen the overall impact of climate change on our nation's economy and security.