

## **A Necessary Ingredient for “Rural Renaissance” In the West: Reliable Water Supplies for Agriculture**

Dan Keppen  
Executive Director, Family Farm Alliance

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 U.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.

These statistics are alarming and they should serve as a wake-up call to the nation and the world. To reverse this decline, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is proposing a new “Rural Renaissance”, which consists of a “Regional Innovation Initiative” built on five pillars: 1) improved and expanded rural broadband; 2) biofuels and biobased products; 3) linking local production with local consumption of farm products; 4) ecosystem markets to pay farmers for storing carbon; and 5) forest restoration and private land conservation.

The Obama Administration’s attention to the plight of rural America by looking for new ways for farmers to improve their cash flow is an encouraging first step. However, American farmers and ranchers have a proven track record of producing safe, affordable and bountiful food and fiber. Why not also look at those things that can be done to encourage them to do what they are very good at doing, and find ways to bring along a new generation farmers that continue what their forefathers did?

In the rural West, water is critically important to farmers and ranchers and the communities they have built over the past century. However, in recent decades, we have seen once-reliable water supplies for farmers steadily being diverted away to meet new needs. Rural farming and ranching communities are being threatened because of increased demand caused by continued population growth, diminishing snow pack, increasing water consumption to support domestic energy, and emerging environmental demands.

Right now, it seems that water policies are being considered separately from foreign and domestic agricultural goals. As I have discussed in past recent columns, federal agencies in the past year have steadily re-written numerous environmental policies that - if not checked – could carry the risk of real potential harm for Western agricultural producers.

At a minimum, federal policies on these and various other water-related issues (Clean Water Act, aging water infrastructure, climate change, land-use, to name a few) should be informed and guided by the goals of preserving our domestic agricultural production capacity and the vitality of rural western communities.

A recent United Nations study finds that global food production must be increased by 70% in the next four decades to meet escalating world hunger demands. American family farmers and ranchers for generations have grown food and fiber for the world, and we will have to muster even more innovation to meet this critical challenge.

That innovation must be encouraged rather than stifled with new regulations and uncertainty.