

Want Continued Affordable Food? Streamline the Regulatory Process

Dan Keppen
Executive Director
Family Farm Alliance

With Americans reaching deeper into their pockets at the supermarket, food is actually becoming a topic of conversation again.

Earlier this year, with stockpiles shrinking and demand increasing, corn prices skyrocketed by 30 percent. Corn prices are shooting up as worldwide demand increases, and at the same time, domestic corn production is expected to drop 8 percent this year. The ripple effect of increased corn prices and diminished supplies will cause additional pangs in checkout lines at grocery stores, as prices of corn-fed meat and poultry products, and the numerous other products that contain corn syrup, further ramp up.

And that has people taking notice. Finally.

Western irrigated agriculture has been so adaptive and successful at providing plentiful, safe and affordable food that it – sadly and ironically - has put the industry at jeopardy. Nobody in the market place believed there could be a problem. The last Americans to experience food shortages are members of the so-called Greatest Generation and their parents. For the most part, they have left us, taking with them the memories of empty supermarket shelves. Because the issue had never been personalized, we all became complacent.

That may be about to change. Everyday folks are now talking about food, and the media and politicians are beginning to take notice.

Against this backdrop of increased worldwide demand and increased reliance on other countries to feed our nation, we are seeing Western farmland and rangeland disappear. In many instances, water availability is driving policy decisions that are taking us down this dangerous path.

Important Western agricultural lands are being urbanized and agricultural water is being used to support these new demands. New environmental water demands imposed by regulatory agencies or courts also first look to agriculture.

For farmers to survive; for food to be produced in America; a stable water supply must be available. In many areas of the West, water resources are available and waiting to be developed. However, the policies of the federal government make development of that water nearly impossible.

Permitting is a major step in any water supply project that requires federal agency action; it can be the most perplexing and confusing step in project development. Projects requiring federal actions must go through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) assessment process, which in itself is not a permitting process, but which has a huge

influence on whether required permits will eventually be issued. Due to extensive NEPA screening requirements and alternative evaluations, projects often lose direction and focus during this process.

NEPA was enacted in 1969 to promote informed decisions and public disclosure of federal actions. Through NEPA assessments other laws such as the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act come into play. These laws and acts require permits or clearances from a number of agencies, and make coordination of the NEPA process the driving force for project permitting.

This was especially true for the High Savery Dam project in Wyoming. This project, storing just 23,500 acre-feet of water, was authorized for a feasibility study in 1979. After 14 years of permitting, 25 years later the project was finally built.

The primary reason the High Savery Dam was permitted and constructed is the persistence and perseverance of the local water conservancy district and the ranchers of the valley. The sponsor's and the state of Wyoming's staying power prevailed in the end.

If our leaders are serious about addressing food safety and its relationship to our economic health and national security, efforts must be directed towards taking meaningful steps to enhance water supplies for Western agriculture. The federal government must adopt a policy of supporting new projects to enhance water supplies while encouraging state and local interests to take the lead in the implementation of those projects. The existing procedures for developing additional supplies should also be revised to make project approval less burdensome, more efficient, and less costly.

Family farmers and ranchers need our leaders to tell them that they want them to keep doing what they are doing. Do we really want farmers and ranchers to continue to work the land and provide us with safe, reliable and affordable food?

If the answer is "no", we might as well disengage now from our fight to try to build the water supply certainty we need to keep them in business.