

## **Leaders are Needed to Turn the Tide of the Western Water Crisis**

By Dan Keppen, Executive Director, Family Farm Alliance

The rural West is slowly being driven to its knees, in alarming ways that demand the attention of our political leaders.

Too many elected officials and media professionals have swallowed the “doom and gloom” hook tossed out by environmental activist organizations. The litigation and media attacks orchestrated by these groups are ending the American dream for more and more family farmers and ranchers. Irrigators on the west side of California’s San Joaquin Valley are the latest victims of the apparent judicial and media preference of “fish before farmers” regulations. Irrigators farther north in the Klamath Project faced a similar predicament in 2001. Growers using the waters of the Snake/Columbia and Platte Rivers could be next.

The faltering economy is hurting the rural West. Higher energy and food prices disproportionately impact the poor, especially in rural areas. Fertilizer and fuel costs are already going through the roof, and livestock operations are also seeing higher costs for feed such as alfalfa and corn. Those increased costs translate to higher prices at the cash register. A survey by the Oil Price Information Service earlier this year found that the fuel crisis is hitting people hardest – as a percentage of income - in rural areas of the South, New Mexico, Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas. In Colorado, a recent study found that homeless families with children cited high energy bills as one main reason they became homeless.

When Western food and fiber producers begin to disappear, the ripple effect will extend far beyond their communities. As a country, we have become complacent, and food production has been taken for granted too long. The United States for nearly four decades helped defeat world hunger through its massive production output of affordable food. But things are rapidly changing. A burgeoning class of consumers in countries like China and India is increasing food demand at the same time that agricultural productivity growth is declining. For the first time in over 30 years, the world food reservoir is dwindling as consumption exceeds production. Commodities are at record lows and prices are going through the roof.

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. Water wars are being fought throughout the West simply because we have not had the vision to develop new, environmentally sound, sources of water.

As food and fuel prices soar, more and more Americans are beginning to realize that the fundamental foundations for their well-being are beginning to erode. Relatively absent in the growing public dialogue about these matters is a demonstration of leadership by our elected officials to confront the root causes of the epidemic of problems hitting us at once.

The ongoing election campaigns would provide a great opportunity for our key political leaders to step up and forcefully address the “big picture” crisis.