

Another Skewed Ag Water Conservation Proposal

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One year ago, the Pacific Institute, an Oakland (CALIFORNIA) think tank released a report - entitled "More with Less" – which claimed that by changing what crops are grown and how California farmers grow them, the state could achieve “substantial water savings”. Last year’s report was later heavily criticized by representatives from major California universities.

Well...not to be deterred, the Institute is back at it, and in July released another report called “Sustaining California Agriculture in an Uncertain Future”. If the recommendations from this report are adopted, it predicts reductions in agricultural water use between 4.5 million and 6.0 million acre feet.

That’s an enormous amount of water – equivalent to nearly three quarters of all the water used by every city and town and every other industry in California. In fact it is twenty times more water than any of the other previous analyses of potential agricultural water savings prepared by experts at the University of California and others.

The report’s views on water economics may be the most radical aspect of this plan. Pacific Institute does not want the price of water to be determined on the basis of its value to water users or the cost of delivering it to where it’s needed. Instead, it contends that the problem with water is that it doesn’t cost enough. We need to raise the price in this formulation, not because we need the money for some other worthy purpose, and not because the cost of delivering the water has gone up.

Twenty years ago, agriculture was by far the largest user of California’s developed water supply. But that’s no longer true. As the Institute report acknowledges, of the total water that people drew from surface supplies or pumped from groundwater in 2000, the largest part – 47.5% - now goes to environmental uses that were not even imagined when the state’s modern water system was built. Agriculture uses 42% and municipal and industrial uses account for 10.5%.

To encourage conservation, Pacific Institute wants to prohibit waste and apply a rigorous needs assessment requiring water users to demonstrate that their use is reasonable and beneficial. But the Institute only proposes to apply these standards to two of the three principal uses of water.

These newly defined environmental uses are the only one of the three that gets water for free. It never has to meet an efficiency standard or demonstrate that it produces any benefits. It’s growing faster than the others. And unlike agricultural users, who generally make water available downstream for re-use, most of the water dedicated for environmental uses in California is simply wasted into the ocean and lost forever.

Water efficiency proposals must be grounded in reality before they are quickly accepted by policy makers and the media. Like a three-legged stool that’s missing a leg, the Pacific Institute’s water policy is drastically skewed.