

**Western Agriculture: What will President-Elect Obama Focus On?**  
**And....Who Will He Look to for Counsel?**

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There has been an incredible amount of speculation regarding the energy, water and agricultural priorities that will be addressed by the Obama Administration.

Environmental activists have been licking their chops for eight years in anticipation of a new administration that will not cater to the private property advocates and resources development interests they associate with Bush Administration policies. However, outside of a clear preference on global warming and clean energy, President-elect Obama has not provided a clear sense as to where he stands on matters that impact Western farmers and ranchers.

His campaign Web site contains one paragraph that addresses “Water in the West”, which expresses a belief that the federal government has an important role to play in helping local communities conserve water and improving technology for water conservation and efficiency.

Not a lot there, although it is clear that there is a preference for the “conserve, conserve, conserve” manta voiced by the Clinton Administration. There is nothing wrong with continuing to look for ways to conserve water; Western farmers and ranchers have a long history of doing just that. However, it strains credibility 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. Hopefully, the Obama leadership team will recognize that reality.

As reported recently in the *Washington Post*, regardless of who takes over at the agencies, the new leadership team will face impatient scrutiny from environmental activists eager to change federal environmental policy. Environmental groups following the election sent President-elect Obama a lengthy set of proposals for nearly every federal land management and regulatory agency.

For example, at the Bureau of Reclamation, the activist groups have asked that the new Administration direct Reclamation to open up existing and proposed irrigation contracts for review to ensure beneficial use of water. The environmental coalition also is pushing Reclamation to recognize the scarcity of freshwater resources in the West in order to promote efficient water use and to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and EPA on setting flow standards for rivers.

Environmental groups are counting on the incoming Obama administration to reverse several Bush Administration policies on endangered species. Their report further recommends new guidance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to shift other conservation programs to focus on environmental priorities.

Let's hope the Obama team takes a careful look at some of these proposed actions before accepting them at face value, since they could generate tremendous uncertainty and risk to Western irrigators.

Understanding the current and future role of irrigated agriculture in the West is imperative. Through thoughtful planning – and listening to the right people - the Obama Administration can play a truly important role in helping find the solutions that have proved so elusive to date.