

A Perfect Storm Descends Upon the Rural West

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A perfect storm of economic factors could slowly drive the West 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. San Joaquin Valley irrigators are the latest victims of the apparent judicial and media preference of “fish before farmers” regulations. Irrigators far 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 likely will mean higher prices at the cash register of grocery stores. 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.

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.

An obvious solution to address this alarming development would be to increase agricultural productivity and output. In our own country, that means finding ways to keep farmers and ranchers doing what they do best, and to further encourage young farmers to follow in their footsteps. This latter challenge could be difficult to achieve. One of the most troubling aspects of the on-going farm crisis is the decline in the number of young farmers entering the field. According to FarmAid, more than half of today'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.

Remarkably absent from the newly-ignited dialogue about fuel and food costs and food safety is recognition of the importance of a secure and sustainable domestic food supply. Politicians from both parties now routinely urge us to end our reliance on foreign energy sources, but nobody is talking about food independence. A national response should include as one of its goals self-sufficiency in food production. It is time for our national leaders to stand up and focus on improving the security, stability, and economic aspects of domestic food production so that our food remains readily available, ample, affordable, and safe.

We also desperately need more of our government leaders to take on the environmental litigation industry, look them in the eye, and tell them – “you are wrong.”

The world needs to move fast to address the “big picture” crisis. Western farmers and ranchers can play a part in a solution to that crisis – if we can keep them on the farm.