

Western Farmer-Stockman WATER LINES

Secure Water for Farmers = Secure U.S. Food Supply

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Everyone is justifiably up in arms over the much-publicized contamination of wheat gluten used in pet food that killed thousands of animals earlier this year. Shortly after that, federal agencies revealed that chickens and pigs had been given similarly tainted feed, and that many of the affected chickens had entered the nation's food chain. Those two events graphically demonstrate just how vulnerable our imported food supply is. They underscore how vulnerable the American public is, to lax food safety standards in other countries, or acts of food-based terrorism.

Remarkably absent from the newly-ignited dialogue about food safety is a recognition of the importance of a domestic food supply. Politicians from both parties now routinely espouse ending our reliance of foreign energy sources, but nobody is talking about food independence. The only solutions the talking heads want to discuss are more inspections by the FDA.

Is anyone even interested in talking about the importance of supporting and protecting domestic food producers? The ones who are talking the loudest are critics of irrigated agriculture, who we can expect to try to deflect this argument by pointing to recent food safety problems with produce and meat that have originated on the domestic front.

Very definitely, those are real issues that have to be addressed. However, we have a much better chance of solving those problems associated with domestic food supplies. Not so with un-inspected foreign food.

Federal policies affecting irrigation water supplies and domestic agriculture are directly linked to food safety, and should be scrutinized in the context of protecting the nation's food chain. But who is paying attention to this issue? What we are seeing instead is an increasing and troubling acquiescence by resource policy makers to look to agricultural water supplies as the "source" to meet expanding urban and environmental water demands.

What we are seeing instead is an increasing and troubling acquiescence by resource policy makers to look to agricultural water supplies as the "source" to meet expanding urban and environmental water demands. Just consider the problems facing farmers and ranchers that rely on groundwater in Idaho and Colorado, who are eyeing pumping restrictions that may dry up

farmland in those states. And no one can forget what happened in 2001, when thousands of acres in the Klamath Project were left without water for the first time in 95 years.

These are current crises or disasters that have already occurred and could have been prevented or mitigated with enhanced water supply infrastructure in place. What will happen when the water appetite accompanying rampant Western urbanization kicks in? What about the water demands associated with the recent trendy focus on ethanol production, which in California alone is expected to require 2.5 trillion gallons of water per year? How do both of these critical new demands factor into the warming Western landscape, which is projected to yield lesser amounts of mountain runoff in the coming decades?

How will all of this play out in the current vacuum of political leadership, where efforts to create meaningful new water storage infrastructure have fallen flat in the last three decades?

Maybe food production and safety – which completely rely on assured water supplies - will be the catalyst that finally gives this issue the attention it deserves.

Traditional farms and ranches are disappearing, and our country recently has actually become a net importer of food. Europe aggressively protects its farmers and its food production capability because its residents have starved within memory. We need to do the same.

The world is still a dangerous place. Having a broad, reliable and safe domestic food supply is just as important as having an army to protect our national interests.

The United States and the rest of the world have always relied upon our farmers and ranchers to feed them. Now it appears that our political leaders have accepted the philosophy that other countries will take over this role.

So, as you ponder which countries we should hand this role over to, you might want to ask a farmer or rancher to join you for dinner. Before too long, you may not again have the chance.

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