

Simple Solution a Step Towards the Final Solution for California Farmers

By Dan Keppen
Executive Director
Family Farm Alliance

After months of fighting between state legislators over the degree of new water infrastructure needed in California, with economic disaster hitting water-short San Joaquin Valley farmers, an oh-so-simple solution to the state's water crisis has been offered up by an academic think tank in Oakland.

The Pacific Institute, which claims that it “works to advance environmental protection, economic development and social equity”, apparently has things all figured out. A report they released last week – entitled “More with Less” - claims that by changing what crops are grown and how California farmers grow them, the state can achieve “substantial water savings”. Perhaps the Institute report's conclusion that these projected water savings can be done for “far less than building new, centralized water storage” will assuage the consciences of Sacramento legislators who appear once again to be unable to reach agreement on supporting new water infrastructure for the state.

As expected, some of California's urban newspapers quickly jumped on board and supported these arguments, with no apparent sense of the associated human and economic consequences. With the Pacific Institute report still hot off the presses, the *San Francisco Chronicle* featured a guest opinion piece written by the report's authors, and the *Sacramento Bee*'s editorial board came out with a column, entitled “*Get over the dams, toward efficiency*” – citing the report.

The arguments against the theoretical findings of the Institute are strong and I suspect those arguments will be widely backed by agricultural economists and irrigation experts in the coming weeks. Farming and water user groups are already weighing in.

The report “completely ignores some of the most pressing problems facing California resource managers,” said Tim Quinn, Executive Director for the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), which represent 90% of the state's water users.

Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition, is critical of the report's recommendation that crop choices would be driven by policy maker and not the market.

Wade likens this to telling a restaurant, “You have to be a shoe store because it uses less water.”

Other parts of report are flat out alarming, such as the proposal to permanently retire 1.5 million acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley. The Pacific Institute report does not delve into the impact this will have on the people and community infrastructure they support, other than

assuring the reader that “impacts on agricultural workers and the local community...should be mitigated.”

The Pacific Institute report correctly notes that farmers have been moving in the right direction for decades, growing more food with less water under difficult conditions. That acknowledgement, at least, is encouraging. For example, in the last 20 years, Westlands Water District farmers have modified their irrigation programs to maximize limited water supplies. Those San Joaquin Valley farmers continue to have one of the highest seasonal application efficiency ratings in the nation.

With that said, it appears that Pacific Institute expects California farmers to continue to conserve right up to the point that the state no longer has a viable agricultural base. The California Dep't of Conservation indicates that more than 1 million acres of farmland in the state was converted to new residential and commercial uses, between 1988 and 1998 alone. Farmers and ranchers are getting pinched, particularly in the Central Valley, where some of California's most productive farm counties are witnessing an eroded agricultural land base and dwindling water supplies.

Farmers, ranchers and rural communities cannot provide the water supplies needed for the Western population boom without ruining their own communities and businesses. Farmland is disappearing at a time when the U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply (just as it needs a stable energy supply). Society should reject an approach which relies on shuttering farming communities to meet new water demands associated with urban growth and the environment.

At what point will too much agricultural land be taken out of production? Do we want to rely on imported food for safety and security? The Europeans, who have starved within memory, understand the importance of preserving their food production capability. They recognize it for the national security issue that it is.

California irrigators recognize that water use efficiency is part of the solution needed to address the state's water challenges. They have a four-decade track record to prove it. However, additional water use efficiency actions must be coupled with needed improvements in water storage and conveyance.

And those actions must be practical, and not lead to further hardship for California's rural communities.