

Strong Leadership Will Keep Optimistic Farmers in Business

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“Farming, if it is to pay, is a pursuit of small economies.”
Augustine Birrell. “Edmund Burke,” *Obiter Dicta: Second Series*, 1887.

The family farmers and ranchers I work with convey varying degrees of optimism and pessimism when they discuss the future of irrigated agriculture in the West. When my association gathers in Nevada for our annual meeting and irrigators from Western states begin to swap stories, the mood appears to be getting more pessimistic each year.

Where does a rancher’s wealth come from, if he has it? How do farmers measure up with others? The answers to these questions are also factors that influence how optimistic today’s family farmers and ranchers are. Farming is unique because of the tremendous amount of money that is tied up in the investment to work the land. By the time the year is over, despite good markets and efficient operations, the financial pickings are slim, compared to other occupations. One of my founding directors – a successful rancher and businessman from Arizona – was astounded later in life when he found out how relatively easy it was to make money running an auto parts store. The rate of investment in farming is very high, but the rate of return is often very low.

It’s easy to sound like a pessimist when you look at how all of your money is tied up, with very little return to show for, and your kids are leaving the farm to try to live like the people they see on television.

On the other hand, if farmers and ranchers want to compare themselves to folks who are flipping burgers for a living, the agricultural lifestyle begins to look better. From a financial standpoint, they should be optimistic, since there are millions of Americans that are living far below the affluence of farmers and ranchers. There is also much more stability in agriculture than there is on many of the main streets of the rural Western communities they shop in.

Many farmers and ranchers are pessimistic about the reliability and availability of water for Western farmers in the future, and they have every right to be. A February 2007 report by a National Research Council (NRC) committee says agriculture is the likeliest target for shifting use to urban needs in the fast growing West. But that study - which focuses on the Colorado River - cautions that “the availability of agricultural water is finite.” It adds that rising population and water demands “will inevitably result in increasingly costly, controversial and unavoidable trade-off choices” in managing a shrinking resource.

The continued focus on moving agricultural water to meet other Western water demands—urban, industrial, and environmental—is very disturbing. It is short-sighted and complacent to believe the illusion that water can be taken from agriculture to take care of new urban and environmental demands.

Consider the South Platte River, where the low flows were historically much lower than they are today because they did not have the benefit of the agricultural-influenced aquifer. When upstream dams were built and irrigation expanded, the streamflow hydrograph essentially leveled out, which shaved flood peaks and recharged and expanded underlying aquifers, which in turn increased South Platte streamflows during low flow periods. In recent years, transfer of irrigation water to Front Range cities and increased water conservation measures have diminished this recharge component, which is now having a negative impact on Platte River groundwater.

In this era of shrinking agricultural landscapes, there does not appear to be much talk of saving agriculture, let alone trying to increase production acreage. The continued focus on eliminating farming and tightening water conservation as means of freeing up water to meet other demands could set us up for a train wreck, I fear.

Our entire society needs that water because we need a strong domestic agricultural base. Americans are justifiably concerned about the recent contamination of wheat gluten imported from China and used in pet food that killed thousands of animals in the United States. We also know that the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspects only about one percent of that imported food. Contamination of food stuffs produced by factories and farms beyond our borders is not controllable.

Meanwhile, urbanization and competition for water supplies are driving Western farmers off the land at a time when American food production in general is following other industries “off-shore” in search of lower costs. Traditional farms and ranches are disappearing, and our country is becoming a net importer of food, drawing frightening parallels to our dependence on foreign sources of energy.

The time has come—indeed, it’s long overdue—for the United States to adopt an overriding national goal of remaining self-sufficient in food production. Policy decisions on a wide range of issues ranging from taxation to the management of natural resources should then be evaluated to be sure they are consistent with that goal.

Knowing that our national leaders still value what farmers and ranchers do will give all of us in Western agriculture hope that positive opportunities will outweigh the challenges that we all now face.

It is the job of our elected policy makers to keep the agricultural resources available for the optimists to utilize.