

The Days of Waiting for the Cavalry are Over

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Every year, the Family Farm Alliance gathers in Las Vegas at our annual meeting and conference to discuss the state of agriculture in the West and to determine the priority issues we will engage on to defend and support our members. This year's conference speakers emphasized that it is time for Western farmers and ranchers to ratchet things up and begin finding ways to control their own destinies in the water arena.

There is a growing feeling that the days are over in which helpful government forces were just over the next hill and ready to ride in to help Western water agencies save the day. In Las Vegas last month, farmers and ranchers heard from four officials from water agencies in different parts of the West that face a host of major challenges and are taking innovative – and independent – approaches toward finding solutions.

Bill Phillamore of Paramount Farms in the southern San Joaquin Valley believes that, for the public and media today, “farming” is more likely to conjure up complaints about genetic engineering, big dairies and their wastewater and air quality problems, and desires for organic farming.

“They don't even understand what organic means,” said Mr. Phillamore. “They don't realize where their food comes from.” He said such attitudes have had enormous consequences on government.

“Political winds have shifted,” he said. “Water agencies don't care about agriculture. We always assumed someone was taking care of us.”

Paramount Farms is taking the fight directly to some of those agencies. Paramount – which relies upon water pumped from California's Bay-Delta - helped found the Coalition for Sustainable Water. The Coalition recently sued the California Department of Fish and Game for its programs supporting a voracious invasive sport fishing species, the striped bass, which feeds on Endangered Species Act-listed fish such as Chinook salmon and the Delta smelt. Other suits are being considered against Delta power plants and wastewater dischargers.

In Wyoming's Little Snake River Conservancy District, local ranchers have concluded that they are the cavalry of today. The district, located in the scenic Colorado River headwaters region that is home to extensive grazing operations, has undertaken aggressive watershed management activities. The district developed 70 stock reservoirs during the 1990s and in 2004 completed High Savery Dam to develop irrigation water with environmental benefits. District wetlands restoration has developed compatible habitat for both stock and wildlife, while restoring creeks.

Now, they're working to improve the fisheries with the goal to eliminate the threat. Little Snake ranchers feel if they can take care of the fish, they can take care of the ranchers, too.

The Northern Colorado Conservancy District is caught in an extreme transition from rural to urban land uses. The 1.6 million acre district has 693,000 irrigated acres but has sustained a huge increase in population. The challenge along the Front Range of the Rockies is to find year round water supplies, and Northern has been working hard with the Bureau of Reclamation to meet that challenge. A new \$90 million Southern Water Supply Project built in the 1990's from Carter Lake proved insufficient. Within two years of completion, participants began asking for more capacity. Pumping stations were installed to pressurize the line and increase capacity, but still, demand remains and the district is leading the effort to construct a new outlet from Carter Lake to help.

Westlands Water District in the San Joaquin Valley has experienced 15 years of pain as water supplies have been cut deeply due to environmental restrictions and water costs have soared to \$100 an acre-foot (with some spot market water this year priced at \$500, due to the uncertainty raised by delta smelt pumping restrictions). Westlands and its growers are increasingly using self-reliance, and financial investment, to meet future water supply needs. Cropping patterns have changed substantially and 125,000 acres have been converted to drip irrigation. The District has purchased 100,000 acres of drainage-impaired land to end irrigation (although dry-land farming will be permitted). In the Delta, Westlands has bought a 3,500- acre ranch for inter-tidal habitat to benefit imperiled fish species.

Westlands's deputy general manager – Jason Peltier – perhaps captured best what irrigators in Westlands and elsewhere in the West are up against and what it will take to survive.

“Our lives are run by biologists and lawyers,” Mr. Peltier said to the Alliance conference. “We're the first generation of water leaders working in an environment so dominated by the environmentalists of our day.”

“We can comply. It will simply cost more money and time.”