



## California Water Policies Inhibit Food Production by Valley Farmers June 19, 2020

By *William Bourdeau, Special to WaterWrights.net*

Over the past several weeks, the COVID-19 pandemic has created images Americans never expected to see in this country: Empty supermarket shelves and people lined up outside of markets waiting to enter to purchase food.

While the food supply chain in this country is strong, and American farmers certainly have the capacity to feed the people in the United States and around the world, anxiety created by uncertainty led to panic buying by consumers.

But what happens when the ability of farmers to feed the nation is suppressed by policies that inhibit the certainty of domestic food production? Shockingly, California's San Joaquin Valley, which grows more than a third of the country's vegetables and two-thirds of the country's fruits, has been facing that very battle for decades.



Over the past 30 years, federal and state policies have taken away millions of acre-feet of water used by Valley farmers to produce food and fiber and have reallocated this water to environmental purposes aimed at producing a rebound of endangered fish species.

The strategy has been a massive failure, as evidenced by the continuously plummeting populations of species this water was intended to enhance and protect. Even in years when the state receives above average precipitation, California's two major water projects, the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, are unable to supply sufficient water to irrigate all of the land historically under cultivation.

Many farmers have had no other option to keep their crops alive but to pump and use the water under their land. Not only is relying on lesser quality groundwater to irrigate crops an expensive last resort for farmers, it has also resulted in over drafted groundwater basins.

In 2014, the California Legislature enacted a new law intended to eliminate this overdraft of which their own policies helped to create. It is called the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, and it will severely limit food producers from the ability to replace the surface water deliveries of the past by turning on their well pumps.

According to a Feb. 15, 2020, report by UC Berkeley Economists, David Sunding and David Roland-Holst, the implementation of the groundwater legislation will result in a 20-percent reduction in acreage used for irrigated agriculture. This is in addition to the already reduced food production in the San Joaquin Valley directly related to less water allotted to agriculture. It has led to the expanded need to depend on other countries for our food supply.

According to the Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, we now import from foreign countries two times more fresh fruit and seven times more fresh vegetables than we did in 1975. It doesn’t have to be like this.

There is much knowledge to be gained from the COVID-19 pandemic, most especially that we should never be reliant on foreign countries for the means of our own survival. President Donald Trump has made it abundantly clear how vitally important it is to bring manufacturing and supply home to American soil. It is even more essential to restore our nation’s food autonomy.

California’s San Joaquin Valley is the only region on the planet that has class one fertile soils, an ideal Mediterranean climate enabling more than 400 food and fiber crops to thrive, and a century’s worth of successful agricultural expertise. The missing required ingredient to this region’s industry is water, which exists, but continues to be reallocated for other purposes at an alarming rate.

Both the state and federal governments have the power to re-examine prior water policy decision failures and must do so without delay. This pandemic has undeniably affirmed the need for policymakers to absolutely ensure America retains her self-sustaining capabilities that keep grocery store shelves bountiful; and that we are never unnecessarily forced to entrust feeding our families to foreign countries.

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