

Drought transforms Valley, right in our own backyards

Dan Morain, Sacramento Bee, 11-1-15

Acre by acre, Sacramento Valley farmland is being transformed. Pastures and row crops are giving way to more valuable orchards. It happened not far from my backyard this summer, out where I take morning walks.

First, workers dug deep new wells and plowed under the remnants of the last alfalfa crop. Later, they leveled the land and carved row upon row of berms. Soon, trees arrived, thousands of them.

Early one morning, before sunrise, I could hear farmworkers before I saw them, pounding stakes to support the seedlings. These are pistachio trees. In other parts of the Valley, almonds are being planted.

The math is clear: Worldwide demand is high, the soil is fertile and, most of all, water reliably flows, unlike in much of the drought-stricken Valley to the south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Greg Hostetler stepped out of his helicopter one morning last week, having flown up from his home in Los Banos south of the Delta. A tall man with a shaved head, Hostetler dropped out of Merced junior college and started farming alfalfa and cotton on 22 acres in 1973. He's not exactly sure how many acres he farms now, but he has land up and down the valley.

"I don't claim to be smart. I get lucky," he said. "I try to do the right thing. If you do that, things come your way."

Lately, Hostetler has been hedging by buying land north of the Delta. One of his almond orchards is outside Winters, easily spotted by the brightly painted silos he restored. Another of his orchards is north of the Sacramento International Airport, to the east of Interstate 5.

The meticulously groomed orchard near where I take my walks is north of Davis, on 500 acres purchased from an old-line Yolo County farm family. There's not a weed to be seen.

"Good water here. Good community," Hostetler said. "I prefer farming where there is a reliable source of water. It is a challenge to get water through the Delta. ... We're not trying to buy the cheapest land. You have to look at the water and the soil."

Not far from where we stood, a construction crew was burying a massive pipe that will transport Sacramento River water to the Yolo County cities of Woodland and Davis. Once the \$250 million project is complete, the cities will rely less on groundwater, and farmers probably will gain an even more secure water supply.

In this fourth year of the drought, California farmers have fallowed 560,000 acres. But in Yolo and Solano counties and farther north, farmers are hardening demand for water by planting permanent crops, mostly nuts.

Hostetler might have chosen to plant almonds outside Davis. But even in the drought, demand is so great that there'd be a two-year wait for enough almond trees for his 500 acres. No matter. He likes growing pistachios, too.

The 2014 Yolo County crop report didn't count pistachio acreage. There wasn't enough of it. That probably will change with the next report, based on Hostetler's investment.

Yolo County's latest report does, however, document the almond boom: almost 20,000 acres of producing almond trees and another 8,000 acres of trees that have not yet matured. That was twice the number of acres of almond orchards just five years earlier.

For years, tomatoes have been the dominant Yolo County crop. They still are No. 1, worth \$151 million. But Yolo County Agriculture Commissioner John Young says the almond harvest, worth \$107 million last year, will overtake tomatoes in five years, maybe less.

Young explained why farmers from other regions and investors looking to make money in the commodity look to Yolo County: "We have good surface water. We have the availability of groundwater."

For now.

"It is all relative," said Tim O'Halloran, general manager of the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District. "Compared to the San Joaquin Valley, we're in great shape. Relative to the drought, we're not so good."

To the south, farmers, unable to draw water from the fragile Delta, keep orchards alive by depleting aquifers. Up here, farmers worry less about the impact of irrigation on the nearly extinct Delta smelt and disappearing winter-run Chinook salmon. There is groundwater, and the reservoirs don't depend on the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Even so, El Niño can't come soon enough.

O'Halloran says groundwater levels are near historic lows. The Indian Valley Reservoir in the Cache Creek watershed has a capacity of 300,000 acre-feet; it sits at 17,000 acre-feet today.

O'Halloran is less concerned when orchards replace irrigated alfalfa fields. Both use equivalent amounts of water. But he does worry when orchards are planted on previously non-irrigated pasture land, as is happening in much of this region. That expands the need for water.

"The question is: 'Have we reached the tipping point where demand is exceeding supply?' " O'Halloran said.

That question must be answered, in Yolo County and in the rest of the state.

Hostetler motioned to the base of his head, where there is an indentation. He had sarcoma lymphoma when he was 12. Understanding that odds say he wasn't supposed to make it to age 67, he feels compelled to "do something for someone every day." Growing nuts for a world that requires protein helps fill that need. So does turning a ragged piece of land into an orchard.

There once was a walnut orchard where I live. At this time of year 25 years ago, the scent of tomatoes would waft over Davis from a cannery, long gone. Now, The Cannery markets itself as the first farm-to-table housing development. Because of Hostetler and farmers like him, our valley is changing once again. Water permitting.