

Stop blaming farmers for California's water problems

John Garner, Sacramento Business Journal, 4-30-10

Garner and his family farm their land in Glenn County in the Sacramento Valley.

The amount of water used to grow our food is far less than many people believe.

I am a second-generation family farmer who produces rice and walnuts in the Sacramento Valley. Like most family farmers, we don't take water for granted. We often use the same water over and over again as it moves from farm to farm. We also pay for our water.

Farm families use the latest technology and best available science to grow high-quality, affordable food with the least amount of water. While there is always room for some improvement, it must be viewed as incremental. As Charles Burt, chairman of the Irrigation Training and Research Center at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, said recently, "We can't squeeze more water out of California's already highly efficient agricultural areas."

Whenever I hear the word "farmer" and "water" mentioned together, it worries me because it is usually critical of farmers. People believe it when they are told repeatedly that farmers use too much water and are contributing to California's water crisis.

It is especially troubling to know that one of the most talked about ways to meet California's water needs is to drain water from the Sacramento Valley to deal with shortages elsewhere in the state.

The Sacramento Valley is one of the world's most productive, diverse agricultural regions.

Farmers take pride in producing our food, but we can't do it without water.

A farm is just many individual plants growing, maturing, and producing food that we all need. You can't deny an adequate amount of food and water to a child or a plant and expect it to grow and become strong and healthy.

The amount of water consumed on farms to grow crops in the Sacramento Valley is small by comparison to the potential supply for the years analyzed in a report by the California Department of Water Resources. Farms consumed an average of only about 10 percent of the potential water supply.

The average annual discharge of water from the Delta to the ocean, water that is no longer available for use, is more than four times the average amount of water consumed by the growth of crops in the Sacramento Valley for the same years.

In addition, water consumed by crops in the Sacramento Valley averages only 26 percent of the total amount of water dedicated for urban, agricultural and environmental uses for those years.

It is time to stop blaming farmers for California's water crisis. We need a solution to our water problem that doesn't sacrifice family farms, and all the food, jobs and environmental benefits they provide.