

Editorial: Our Water Dance Marathon Has Just Begun

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The all-night water dance marathon has just started, as one tune ends and another begins, in our struggle to secure adequate water supplies for California agriculture. Rummy from the months of wrangling with legislation that seemed to forget that everyone has to eat, we are staying on the dance floor, determined to maintain the viability of our working farms and ranches.

Everyone realizes that the package of water legislation that was negotiated last week, and that voters will have to approve some funding for next November, will at best benefit a future generation of farmers in our state. That being said, time must now be dedicated to ensuring reliable water supplies for the crops that will need to be planted in the coming months.

It seems that many legislators and regulators at the state and federal levels have forgotten that sufficient water deliveries mean a stable, safe and affordable domestic food supply for families throughout our nation and the countries that rely on our exports. California farms and ranches also stimulate rural economies by providing jobs and revenue. Working farms are economic stimulus projects that require no bricks and mortar. The infrastructure is in place, as long as water is available.

Short-term projects need to be brought on line right away. These include the Two Gates project that would protect fish while allowing water to be moved south and the “intertie” of the Delta-Mendota Canal and the California Aqueduct. This intertie would link the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project, creating shared pumping capacity between the two, to add flexibility to the water system when it is needed.

Farmers in many parts of the state are working with their bankers for financing for next year's crops. To obtain financing, farmers need a water budget for the bankers as well as an economic budget. If growers have to plan to buy water on the spot market, those prices could be very high, so the question of whether a farmer could turn a profit when water costs are high is unanswered. Bankers also want to be sure that growers will have enough of a water supply to raise a crop.

Even if it is a wet year, as some water experts are predicting, the question about how much water will be able to get to farmers is unclear. Biological opinions on protected fish have worsened the water shortages, and while we have asked the federal government to revisit those opinions, our state government needs to consider the human and economic crises that have been created in that process.

California has lost 2,500 farms and 6.2 million acres of farmland in the last 20 years, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, some to poor land use planning and development, some to the aging population of farmers and many to onerous regulations penned by people who have probably never set foot on a farm. With this water uncertainty, we stand to lose many more farms when we should be cultivating new, young farmers to take on this noble profession.

Fertile farmland and the farm families who steward the land are a precious natural resource and should be treated as such. It is up to all of us to focus on keeping farmland productive to provide the food and farm products our state and nation depend on. There is no higher use for land than that.

To truly fix our broken water system, current and future elected officials must push for and bring to fruition new water storage both aboveground and underground; must improve our ability to move water; must protect the water rights that people depend on; and must work to enhance the delta ecosystem without compromising jobs and commerce. These bills move us in that direction in the long term, and we will continue to work with the administration and state agencies as they implement the bills, to make certain that they recognize how important it is to grow food and strengthen rural economies in California.

Governing our work on water is CFBF Policy 63, penned by delegates throughout the state and that begins with the paragraph, “In the development of California's water resources, the vested rights of water users must be inviolate; contracts under this development between the state and agencies created under state law must be inviolate; and areas in which water originates must not be deprived of any quantity and quality of such water needed to satisfy the beneficial requirements of such areas.”

In reference to the state's water plan, the policy continues with this, “It is the Legislature's stated intent that neither the state nor the nation should be allowed to become dependent upon a net import of foreign food, and that as the nation's population grows, California should produce enough food to supply the state and also continue to supply the historical proportion of the nation's food supply, approximately 25 percent of the nation's table food.” That is solid policy we will continue to champion in our negotiations.

The Legislature and the governor have recognized the key elements needed to achieve long-term solutions to our state's water problems. We appreciate the governor's persistence in pressing for water development, and the efforts by legislators to finalize the water package. But there is still a lot of work to do.

We need now to hold our leaders accountable and stress that any water solutions must balance food production and jobs with environmental protection. Throughout history, a vibrant community able to support itself always started with a healthy agricultural base. We are all tired of the dance, but as the song changes we will continue our marathon, certain of a win.

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