

The Causes and Effects of California's Drought

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California, known worldwide as the Golden State, is starting to look more dry and brown than golden. The “bread basket” of the world is losing its most vital resource. No, not Hollywood A-listers—California is losing its water. That means our long-standing drought isn't just affecting how often we can water our lawns or wash our cars in our driveways; it's reducing the amount of food we can grow.

Reductions in California's agricultural output affect the whole nation since the state is responsible for producing up to a quarter of America's food. So how exactly did America's largest food-growing state end up in a record-breaking drought? The largest misconceptions are that it just isn't raining enough, or there hasn't been enough snowpack, or Central Valley farmers are overusing water, or that it's all due to global warming. But the truth is, the drought is almost entirely man-made—and it's not being perpetuated by Valley farmers, but by politicians and bureaucrats who slap crushing environmental regulations on the Valley's water supply.

Ironically, the lawmakers who set the rules for what the majority of Californians can or can't do with their water are entirely unaffected by their own legislation. They have their own water supply sent in from Hetch Hetchy, and that supply isn't subject to the regulations they impose on the Central Valley. One would think they'd at least consult Valley food-growers to see what their needs are, right? Wrong. Even though Valley farmers are responsible for one of

the largest economic sectors in the state (and the country), their outcries against anti-water legislation seem to fall on deaf ears. If the politicians aren't listening to the farmers themselves or to the field workers who are losing their only sources of income as dried up farms go out of production, then to whom exactly are they listening?

Simply put, the legislators are listening to deep-pocketed "environmental protection" organizations. These groups file endless lawsuits claiming that water used in agriculture hurts local wildlife, namely the chinook salmon and especially the delta smelt. That's right, American farmers are losing their income, food production is being curtailed, and the local economy is taking a massive hit, all for the sake of the smelt—a three-inch baitfish. And keep in mind that these "environmental" groups may not have the most altruistic motives—they are making millions from these lawsuits. At this point, they have profiting off environmental lawsuits down to a science, and they have turned that science into a multi-million-dollar business.

Environmental lawsuits are largely to blame for California's water crisis, but they're enabled by bad legislation that needs to be revoked or drastically amended. The problem really began with Congress' passage of the Endangered Species Act, which has served as the basis of some of the most destructive anti-water lawsuits. Since then other anti-water bills have been passed, most notably the Central Valley Project Improvement Act. In recent years, numerous bills have passed the House of Representatives to amend these laws in order to secure adequate water for the Central Valley, but none of them have been approved in the Senate.

Now that we have established the broad, overlying causes of California's historic drought, let's look at the drought's effects. California, which is America's largest state economy,

has traditionally produced about one-quarter of the nation's food. What happens when such a crucial state begins to lose its premier economic sector? When food production is curtailed, other sectors take significant hits as well. Manufacturers are no longer being commissioned to make as much farm or harvesting equipment, so they have to lay off employees. Companies that package the freshly harvested produce aren't seeing all the business they traditionally had, so they have to downsize too. All this lost production and lost employment depresses economic growth. Furthermore, with less produce coming out of the Valley, there is less for consumers to buy, meaning there is less money coming back to our local and state economies, further crippling our ability to produce more food and goods.

Because the demand for California food remains high but the supply is falling, prices are rising for locally grown and harvested produce. Once prices reach a certain threshold, demand for California produce will fall as people turn to cheaper alternatives.

Many people outside California may not personally be affected by the problem—switching to imported produce may not strike them as a major problem, even if it's not as good as California-grown food. But for the farm workers and field hands here, it means the ability to make ends meet and to feed their families. Liberal politicians continually preach about how crucial migrants are for the agriculture sector, but then they enact and support anti-water legislation that puts these very same migrants out of work. Shanty towns have sprung up in the San Joaquin Valley full of migrant families who have lost their jobs in agriculture, as many California farmers don't have enough water to keep all their land in production.

For many people outside California, the difference is simply the number on the price

tag. For the families of California's Central Valley, it's much more.