



Is Anyone Listening?

A Wake-up Call to Our National Leaders from an American Rancher

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We tried to warn you...

Those of us who produce food and fiber for Americans, and for the world, feel like modern-day Cassandras. In Greek mythology, she was cursed to deliver true prophecies, but not to be believed. We now face a reckoning. America gave up domestic manufacturing over the last several decades leading to global trade deals that resulted in a diminished national security. We are now experiencing a crisis which will lead to the loss of domestic food production, inevitably leading to a complete collapse of our national security.

Historically, strong nations are the ones that can feed themselves.

Fifteen years ago, I appealed to the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics Advisory Board (NRAEE) to pivot its energies towards assessing the real state of Western irrigated agriculture. The NRAEE Board in October 2006 was pondering agricultural topics to further investigate, including finding ways to “improve water use efficiency in agriculture”, “reduce potential pollution from agriculture”, and “adapt crops to grow well with less water”.

At the time, my fellow board members at the Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) were surprised the NRAEE game plan virtually ignored the growing concerns many producers had with what we were seeing on the ground. Agricultural water supplies all over the West were being reallocated to meet new urban and environmental water demands.

Fifteen years ago, we explained to NRAEE how productive Western agricultural lands were being converted to residential and commercial development. In many cases, farm and ranch water was being used (transferred or bought) to support these new demands. At that time, ag water was also being looked to as a means of satisfying new environmental water demands imposed by regulatory agencies or courts.

Fifteen years ago, we asked NRAEE some pointed questions that demanded answers. At what point will too much agricultural land be taken out of production? Do we want to rely on imported food for safety and security?

Fifteen years ago, we pointed out that Europeans, who had starved within memory, understood the importance of preserving and protecting their food production capability. They recognized it for the national security issue that it is.

And some of those countries still do.

Earlier this month, *Business Post* reported that all farmers in Ireland will be asked to plant some of their land in wheat, barley and other grains, as part of emergency plans being drawn up by the government to offset a predicted food security crisis in Europe amid Russia's ongoing assault on Ukraine.

Fifteen years ago, we counseled NRAEE Advisory Board members that if they wanted to do something truly meaningful we, too, should look at the bigger picture. Urbanization, competition for water supplies and an increasing burden of regulations were already driving Western farmers off the land at a time when American food production in general was beginning to follow other industries "offshore" in search of lower costs.

Fifteen years ago, we raised concerns about the ability of global producers to keep up with food demand of a growing world population. Those concerns were amplified and documented by the Global Agricultural Productivity (GAP) Report, which in 2010 first quantified the difference between the current rate of agricultural productivity growth and the pace required to meet future world food needs. That report predicted that total global agricultural output would have to be doubled by the year 2050 to meet the food needs of a growing global population.

Ten years ago, we pleaded with policy makers to recognize and address the fact that our own farmers and ranchers were being subjected to increased regulations and related uncertainty that was making it harder to survive in a harsh economy. We warned that putting just a part of that group out of work and taking agricultural lands out of production so that water supplies can be redirected to new urban and environmental demands would impart huge limitations on our future ability to feed our country and the world.

Ten years ago, we urged our federal leaders to begin seeking the right combination of tools and incentives, as well as both public and private sector investments, to allow Western irrigated agriculture to help close the global productivity gap and sustainably meet the world's needs in 2050.

We kept speaking these truths for the following decade. We saw some growing recognition and even positive political response to some of our recommendations, most notably in form of "once-in-a-generation" spending for Western water infrastructure included in the recent Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

But sadly, the arguments we made in support of Western irrigated agriculture have been drowned in a flood of commentary from faraway critics, many of them developers and litigators, who downplay the importance of protecting the use of water to produce affordable and safe food and fiber.

...But now our worst fears have become very real.

For a long time, there was an inborn appreciation and awareness by our policy leaders for the critical importance of a stable food supply. A nation with a strong defense and a strong agricultural base is well poised for peace and prosperity. With these ends in mind, our forefathers created the strongest, most stable nation in the history of man. This foresight enabled us to rescue the world from darkness in two world wars, and largely -although not entirely- keep the globe at peace for the past 70 years.

Sadly, it appears that many policy makers and consumers alike have lost that awareness. Americans spend less of their income on food than any country in the world, but take the availability of abundant, better, safer and affordable food for granted. Meanwhile, farmers and ranchers continue to feel the pinch– and now that pinch is translating itself back into the supermarket.

As the United States continues to import more and more of its food supply, people in third world countries are also feeling the pinch. That pinch is going to feel more like a punch soon, with inflation already spiraling out of control, and the seeds of a global food shortage germinating in the trampled grain fields of Ukraine.

Yes, you read that correctly: I said food shortage.

A large part of Vladimir Putin's leverage to keep the Western world from helping Ukraine is Russia's control over a vast part of their energy supply. What kind of leverage do you think Putin will exert should he control the immense amount of food that comes out of Ukraine?

Ukraine's farmlands encompass the same land area as the entire state of California. It is referred to by many as the breadbasket of the world. It accounts for 12% of global wheat exports, 16% of global corn exports, and 18% of global barley exports.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization just reported that global food prices hit their highest level on record last month. This report does not account for the full effects of the Ukraine conflict.

We have no direct control over these larger global developments, but we do have control over what we do with our resources here in the United States. I stand aghast that, in a year when a critical food exporting country is heroically and desperately trying to stave off an invasion, Americans are simultaneously voluntarily doing away with our own food production capacity and with it, our own national security.

A Shift in Priorities

Curtailing U.S. agricultural productivity today seems to me to be both inconceivable and sheer madness. But it's actually happening, in places like the Oregon and California's Klamath Basin and California's Central Valley. The Central Valley is one of only five areas on earth that feature a Mediterranean climate giving its farmers a unique advantage over other regions when it comes to growing crops—more than 230 varieties of fruits, nuts, and other valuable commodities.

The federal government and California's inflexible water management practices will likely provide ZERO water for the second straight year to these farmers, at a time when our country and the world will

desperately need their products. Much of that water instead will be directed to help fish populations, although nearly 30 years of empirical data has failed so far to show a positive response to such water shifting schemes from those targeted fish populations.

At the same time, punishing new farm labor laws – recently enacted in states like California, Colorado and Oregon – have been advanced by animal rights and environmental justice activists, who publicly call out farmers and ranchers as rapists, racists and human traffickers. This demonization is as destructive as it is false.

In the decade since 2006, new rules at both the state and federal levels have imposed significantly higher regulatory burdens on California growers, specifically with respect to food safety, water quality, labor wages, air quality; and worker health and safety. A [recent case study](#) by the California Polytechnic Institute at San Luis Obispo showed that, for one lettuce grower, production costs increased by 24.8% from 2006 to 2017, while the costs of regulatory compliance rose by **795%**.

We know that American farmers, and farmworkers, are literally “salt of the earth” folks. Much is made by some critics of the role of corporate agriculture, but almost 96 per cent of agricultural operations are family owned. They are the beating heart of America.

Yet many farmers today discourage their children from following them on the land. They cannot expect to profit from their hard work, and they are demonized for doing it. This is a crisis for Americans and American security. As in the past in this country, the critical work of food and fiber production must be respected and rewarded if we are to maintain our strength.

Our daily serving of news for the past year has been flooded with coverage of politicians, activists, and the media bombarding the public with a common message: climate change is destroying the planet, and we must take immediate and drastic action to halt it. Meanwhile, the need to produce 50 percent more food worldwide in the coming decades to fill the looming global “food gap” is hardly mentioned at all.

A Global Food Gap Looms

During the next 30 years, the world’s population is projected to grow larger and more prosperous. Accelerating productivity growth at all scales of production will be imperative to meet the needs of consumers and address current and future threats to human and environmental well-being. The human, economic, and environmental consequences of not meeting food production targets are profound. Poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition – already at high levels in some parts of the globe – will condemn hundreds of millions more people to ill health and unfulfilled potential.

At a time when the future of Ukraine’s ability to help feed the outside world is at risk, and the world’s best producers are watching their water flushed out to the sea, our ability to increase productivity is being further curtailed. The grim global conditions we once expected to encounter in 2050 may now hit us a decade ahead of schedule.

We cannot continue long-term hypothetical processes that focus primarily on continued conservation and downsizing of Western agriculture. The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. As we teeter on the brink of world war, the stability of domestic food supply becomes

even more pressing. And, our irrigated system of agriculture in the West can provide the most stable food supply in the world if we let it.

Reality Check Time

A “politically correct” mindset seems to have become fashionable when it comes to Western water policy. That mindset assumes that the policies of the past have now outlived their usefulness and practicality. Those policies – built on the prior appropriation water rights system, sound hydrology, and water management accountability - enabled the West to be settled and to flourish. In the case of water rights, we are fortunate that prior appropriation has left much of the water in the hands of those who love the land – often times, farmers, ranchers and tribes. Otherwise, the water would inevitably flow toward money and urban growth.

Now, certain activists, academics, and journalists are pushing a coordinated mantra and a belief that we no longer need to manage Western water resources in a manner that continues to encourage investment in agricultural production. And many times, this mindset is one that believes that the continued development and use of Western water resources for agriculture is inconsistent with the nation’s goals to protect and steward the environment.

My wife and I spent time last November at the COP26 climate summit in Scotland, where I witnessed international negotiators huddle to hammer out an acceptable climate agreement. I was dismayed that agriculture garnered little attention, except as a source of methane emissions. While people were exhorted to eat less beef, no one discussed the fact that much of the deforestation of the Amazon—now at a tipping point—is to produce beef to be sold in the United States.

COP26 participants talked a lot about deforestation. There was no discussion of the role that grazing can play in restoring forests in the Western United States. Other than exhorting people to plant more trees, little attention was paid to the role sound forest management has in sequestering carbon and managing water. These salient points were glaring omissions.

Much of the media coverage on the fires raging in Northern California last year featured commentary from politicians, environmental activists and academics who pointed to climate change as the driving factor behind the fires that have forced tens of thousands of Westerners to flee their homes. Scant attention was paid to rural Westerners who believe that forest management – or rather, the lack of management by federal agencies, driven in part by environmental litigation – likely plays a greater role in the current degraded, “Pick Up Sticks” condition of our Western forests.

It’s galling to see those same groups, with their undeniable record of failure, now leading the charge to turn Western resource management on its head in the name of the global climate “crisis”.

Current world events are leading more Americans to reconsider their priorities and ponder just how safe and stable we really are.

The Biden Administration needs to turn its attention to serious discussion of the climate “crisis” in the context of our food security. Policy makers need to coolly assess and address the vast press coverage about the latest “doom and gloom” report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

(IPCC) warning of the deadly effects of climate change both now and in the future. We need to promote a measured understanding of the climate crisis in the context of food supply.

Could it be that political reality is setting in, as average Americans – bracing for increased inflation, higher gas prices, soaring food costs, and war – reset their priorities on issues that likely have a much more substantive impact on their daily lives?

“Those in the Arena”

Western producers are seeing that their way of life is being written off by a segment of the public that appears to believe that the tragedy occurring in many parts of the West is a comeuppance that farmers and ranchers somehow deserve.

During a drought, it often seems like much attention is given to the critic, who has never managed water resources or implemented projects to improve water management or habitat for water-dependent species but has the “simple” answer to the problem at hand. Inevitably, the critics focus on their favorite beneficial use of water, which they favor at the expense of other important beneficial uses of water.

I still hold a sliver of hope that critical thinkers and leaders will easily distinguish this nonsense from reality.

There is a clear distinction to many of us in the rural West between those who are actively working – “those in the arena”, as once extolled by Teddy Roosevelt - and the observers offering only critiques. Many Western ranchers like me are truly actively engaged, looking for ways to solve water challenges, as opposed to the myriad of outside interests who have no problem sharing their criticism and harmful strategies. We will keep pushing to inform policy makers and the public on the consequences of drought and downsizing Western agriculture—namely water shortages, devastation to rural communities and lifestyles, food insecurity and higher prices at the supermarket.

Ironically, perhaps it’s because Western irrigated agriculture has been so adaptive and successful at providing plentiful, safe and affordable food that it is now jeopardized. Most policy makers and media pundits believed there could never be a problem with food production in this country. The last Americans to experience real food shortages were members of the so-called Greatest Generation and their parents. For the most part, they have left us, taking with them the memories of empty supermarket shelves and Victory Gardens.

When the issue has never been personalized, it’s easy to be complacent.

We have some decisions to make

Western water policy, over the past one hundred years, is one of the great success stories of the modern era. Millions of acres of arid Western desert have been transformed into the most efficient and productive agricultural system in the world.

Irrigated agriculture isn't a good investment, it is an incredible investment¹. It continues to be a leading economic driver in the West. However, the successes of the past have not come without a cost. The incredible expansion of the population, physical modifications made to rivers and streams, and agricultural practices themselves have impacted the environment. It is these impacts that are now causing many to question the policies of the past.

Resolving these issues without destroying what we worked so hard to achieve is the challenge that we all face. But to be successful, we must face them together. No resolution will be found unless we find a way to balance all competing needs in a way that supports continued growth of irrigated agriculture.

Are we going to wake up and realize the world has drifted far from the stability we have known for our lifetimes and make required course corrections? Or do we remain committed to our own demise and continue on a crash course with what may likely be the greatest food shortage in American history?

We have some decisions to make.

Agricultural production in the West is an irreplaceable, strategic national resource that is vital to U.S. food security, the ecosystem, and overall drought resilience. The role of the federal government in the 21st Century should be to protect and enhance that resource by doing whatever it can to ensure that water remains on farms. There may never be a better time than now for thoughtful and courageous leaders to stand up and shout down the critics and back seat drivers who don't have a single minute's worth of experience "in the arena".

If not now, when? If not us, who?

Western producers can and will successfully work through future droughts and water shortages in a collaborative and effective way. The future of millions of people and millions of acres of farms and ranches and the food and fiber they produce rest on this belief.

I'll be the first one to admit it - we must become more effective in communicating to the world the value of farmers and ranchers. Our societies are confused. The basic principles of existence are under pressure. The steady rhythms of food production and attendant ecosystem services and benefits are crucial to understanding our challenges and finding solutions.

At the Family Farm Alliance, we will continue our efforts to ensure Western irrigated agriculture continues to play a vital role in feeding our Nation, while keeping our rural communities and the environment healthy.

At a time of unprecedented change, one certainty holds firm and true – our nation's most valuable natural resource must be preserved.

¹ A 2015 study by Dr. Darryl Olsen found that, for the 17 Western states studied, the total household income impacts from irrigated agriculture, associated service industries, and food processing sectors was \$172 billion. The annual return to the economy from the \$11 billion investment in the federal system has been estimated at \$12 billion annually. In other words, the economy of the United States receives a greater than 100% return each year on this investment.

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