

# Family farm absent from debate over state's water

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By Don Villarejo

**“W**ATER FOR SALE” signs have bobbed to the surface of California rivers and lakes. But our new water policy wrongly dictates that environmental, urban and agricultural interests engage in a three-way bidding war for limited resources.

Family farms and rural communities also belong to the environment, and water allocations should preserve them as well. It is true that the environment has suffered at the hands of big agribusiness. But 90 percent of California's farms are small, family operations with a different set of values.

Farming – family farming – is inseparable from the environment. Indeed, the major custodians of our natural environment in the United States are family farmers. While the National Park Service administers 70 million acres, more than 960 million acres are in commercial farm production. Much of that land belongs to family farmers who seek to live in harmony with nature.

There are less-enlightened farmers, to be sure. But their attitudes are no more disturbing than urban California's superiority complex.

During a guest lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, I asked a natural resources class, “How many of you think that residential urban use is a more efficient use of water resources than agriculture?” and the overwhelming majority of the students agreed that was true.

Then we did the arithmetic. In residential areas such as Sacramento, the annual water consumption is about 1 million gallons per acre of houses. That's 3 acre-feet of water – about the same amount of water used on an average acre of irrigated farmland in California.

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I asked the students where the water goes. On the farm, it nourishes natural vegetation, percolates into the groundwater table, evaporates into the atmosphere or returns to creeks and streams. Most urban water is piped into treatment plants because it becomes hazardous waste.

Misconceptions about water transfers involve more than a foolish notion that environment can be separated from rural areas or that subdivisions are more environmentally friendly than farms.

Water transfers also are based on the assumption that our natural resources are commodities to be sold on the free market without serious consequences – another spin on Reagan-Bush “trickle-down” economics. In this case, the argument is based on the arrogant attitude that negotiators for agriculture, urban and environmental interests represent all of California.

**I**T IS no accident that these negotiators usually meet in urban areas. An entirely different atmosphere would prevail in a rural community such as Huron, a west San Joaquin Valley town of 4,766. Huron's residents are almost totally dependent upon agriculture for their livelihood. Annual per capita income is about \$5,400; 44 percent of the population lives in poverty.

If the water that nourishes Huron is instead sold to wealthy Southern California, will Huron share in the profits? Not one nickel has been found to build a high school, or even a junior high school, for this town where 80 percent of the adults lack a 12th-grade education.

I have asked U.S. Rep. George Miller and U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley – who engineered landmark federal legislation for water transfers in California – how communities such as Huron will survive. Their answer was, well, the problem will take care of itself.

No, it will not. After years of study, the Committee on Western Water Management of the prestigious National Research Council concluded: “No issue gave the committee more trouble than the question of how to characterize and evaluate the effects of water transfers on small communities. The reason is obvious: No consensus exists within our society about the value of these communities. The communities generally have no legal rights because we view them as inferior . . . and we generally allow the market to dictate their fate.”

What a tragic irony that in the name of the environment, those who live furthest from nature should judge those who live closest to the land. There is an alternative: Guarantee enough water for 160 acres to any resident family farmer with irrigated crop land. Limit water transfers to those whose supplies exceed that amount. It's an idea that should sound familiar, since the federal reclamation programs that built Shasta Dam and the Central Valley Project were intended to provide subsidized water only to family farmers.

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