

Commentary: Nevada agriculture is conservation partner, not enemy

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Last month, the Nevada Drought Forum asked to hear from agriculture about the impacts of the ongoing drought, what actions farmers and ranchers have taken to deal with those impacts, and what actions we'd like to see from the state in the short and long term.

As we head into this month's state Drought Summit, it's important to correct some misconceptions. Agriculture, especially in California, has been in the media hot seat lately for the amount of water it uses. Pick your enemy: almonds or alfalfa, milk, meat, or melons. Anything but drip irrigation is considered a waste of water. I was heartened to see that in recent public opinion surveys, residents haven't bought into these skewed perspectives, and support conservation to preserve local agriculture and the environment.

First off, there are some simple facts we need to face. Everybody needs to eat, and cutting back the agricultural industry means people will no longer be able to afford healthy food for their families. Perhaps most importantly is the fact that the water of the West has already been allocated, and in most cases over-allocated. Water systems are interconnected, and a diversion at one point has ripple effects. There simply is no new water, or easy answer, left.

Some folks pit agriculture against the environment, but we depend on the health of the land to stay in business. Any destructive or unsustainable practices hurt not just the environment, but also the livelihoods and homes of family-owned, family-operated farms and ranches.

Water cuts for agriculture, or the conservation measures we take, often happen quietly, outside of the public's or media's view. Two of our ranches saw the mountain streams that fed them dry up a couple of years back. When a basin is stressed in Nevada, the State can make cutbacks. Lovelock has a zero percent allocation right now. Smith and Mason valleys may see 50 percent cuts, and because of how Nevada's water rights work, that means the newest operations will get nothing. Try to wrap your head around being told you have no water to work with for a year.

Some have talked about reducing the land in production. Grazing is a beneficial use on many western lands that are too rugged for farming, controlling potential fuel for wildfires. When we irrigate and grow feed for our cattle, we're sustaining for a couple of months a herd that can forage on non-irrigated land the rest of the year. That's a smart investment if you ask me. And

we've already seen cattle numbers drop by 30 percent during the drought, another conservation measure that's often overlooked.

When it comes to growing alfalfa for export, more and more dairy farms and even ranchers need feed now, thanks to the drought. Keeping that land in production in good years means that in difficult times like these, we can keep more of those supplies close to home for those who need them.

You'll never meet a farmer or rancher who thinks their water is more important than the basic needs of all people, urban or rural. But water and food are both necessary for life. We all need to work together and share the difficult choices in order to keep the West a bountiful and beautiful place for our children and grandchildren.

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