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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

California's water glass can always be full

Out of sight, out of mind. That appears to be the philosophy of some water managers in California.

When surface water is plentiful, groundwater in most areas is seen mainly as a supplemental source of water for urban, industrial and agricultural users.

In reality, however, it is more than a supplement; groundwater supplies up to 16 million acre-feet of the state's water, or up to 23 percent of the water used by people in California. That's more than three times the amount of water supplied by the Colorado River.

During the past four years, drought has forced farmers in parts of California — the Tulare Lake Basin and the Central Coast especially — to rely almost exclusively on groundwater for

Online

To view Thomas Harter's video presentation, go to www.capitalpress.com

their crops. As a result, some parts of California have seen underground water levels drop by more than 10 feet and some by more than 50 feet.

Half full, half empty

There are two ways to look at California's groundwater. Either the glass is half empty, or it's half full.

Those who see it as half empty believe the only way to stop the drop in groundwater levels is to stop farmers and others from irrigating their crops and stop cities and other users from withdrawing water.

Those who see it as half full see the opportunity to work with farmers and others to allow them

to irrigate their crops and provide water to other users — and use their land to replenish the aquifers below. According to Thomas Harter, a professor at the University of California, the drawdown of groundwater has created 20 million to 40 million acre-feet of storage space underground. If these aquifers are recharged during the wet winters, they can serve as "banks" to supply water during dry periods.

Opportunity awaits

This is an opportunity. By recharging the aquifers of the Central Valley and other regions that have been drawn down during the four-year drought, California's water managers can store water enough to avoid future shortages.

This sounds amazing, and it is.

In addition to building more surface water storage in the form

of dams, California can take excess winter runoff and use it to recharge aquifers. The result could be up to 40 million acre-feet of water ready for use in times of drought at a fraction of the cost of dams.

The concept of aquifer recharge is not new. Some Central Valley farms are doing it right now, as are water managers in such far-flung locations as Idaho and Oregon.

In Helm, Calif., farmer Don Cameron is using excess winter runoff in the Kings River to flood his land to recharge the aquifer below, replacing the groundwater he used last summer.

Win-win result

The result is a win for him and other water users in the area. His soil and orchards get a dose of much-needed moisture, and the aquifer below is replenished, with

water available when drought returns — an inevitability in much of California.

Water is not an issue in the West; it is the issue. Every groundwater basin — there are 515 in California alone — needs to be managed in a way that keeps farmers, industry and cities well-supplied. The way to do that is to make sure water is well-used, but also to make sure excess runoff during the wet winters is stored either in reservoirs or in aquifers.

That will assure California of a solid economic future and assure Californians that their glass will always be full.

Right now, that seems like a dream, but in the future, with cooperation and creative management, it can become a reality.



OUR VIEW

Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

Presidential politics run against TPP

Four of the five remaining candidates for the Republican and Democratic nominations for president oppose the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the big 12-nation trade pact awaiting Congressional approval.

That doesn't bode well for agriculture in the Northwest.

Donald Trump says the TPP is "insanity," a "horrible deal" "designed for China to come in, as they always do, through the back door and totally take advantage of everyone."

Ted Cruz opposes the pact, and always has.

Hillary Clinton was for it, when she was secretary of state, and then was against it when she became a

candidate for president. She says the deal doesn't meet her standard for providing Americans good-paying job.

Bernie Sanders has called it "a disastrous trade agreement designed to protect the interests of the largest multi-national corporations at the expense of workers, consumers, the environment and the foundations of American democracy."

Only John Kasich, the long-shot Republican candidate, favors the deal. He calls it "critical" to creating economic and strategic alliances.

Seven years in the making, the TPP is important for farmers in the West.

U.S. agriculture is trade-dependent, especially in the West. Oregon,

Washington, Idaho and California export about \$30 billion a year in agricultural goods overseas, mainly to Pacific Rim nations. Included in the TPP are nearly all of those nations: Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Peru, Vietnam, Chile, Brunei, Singapore and New Zealand.

No trade deal is perfect, and there are many things about this one that give even proponents pause. But walking away from the deal would be a disaster for agriculture because U.S. goods would have impossible barriers not imposed on signatories who are also our competitors.

We hope Congress will approve the deal before it gets too caught up in election year politicking.

Readers' views

Dividend, carbon fee benefits all

RE: "Washington drought losses estimated at \$336M — and counting" (Capital Press, Jan 8). The drought is one more symptom that we have a warming planet due to our greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels.

We had cherries poaching on the trees and grapes "raising" on the vine. Record heat did scorch fields, as you report, and most of us did suffer damage to crops with lower quality and yields.

The Feb. 5 special "Water" edition reported on water-saving techniques. Our agricultural extension services are offering Climate Smart agriculture adaptation workshops through USDA Climate Hubs. The one in Montana was well attended by the Montana Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Stock-growers, Grain Growers, extension specialists and others

who learned about basic climate science from climate scientists and policy options from former Congressman Bob Inglis, R-S.C.

The best policy is the Carbon Fee and Dividend. It places a steadily rising fee on carbon at the source (mine, well, port of entry) and returns 100 percent of the revenue as a monthly dividend check to all legal U.S. citizens. It's designed to unleash market forces to help our nation transition off of fossil fuels and onto renewables through innovative technologies, like New Holland's NH2 Tractor over two to three decades. It includes a border tariff adjustment to rebate ag exporters.

Fortunately, a bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus has formed in the House of Representatives. It seeks to bring both parties together to address climate change.

Urge your congressman to support the Carbon Fee and Dividend and to take

action to mitigate climate change now.

Alexandra Amonette
Richland, Wash.

Certifications are not the problem

Re: "There's a certification for that," March 16, 2016, Capital Press.

Time was, farmers produced the foods we ate. We largely processed them ourselves. No longer. The link that has been broken is the one between real food and family farmers, and the food-like substances in our stores. Look on the container. There's a chemical for that. If you can't pronounce it and do not know its impact, maybe you shouldn't eat it.

Ag-gag laws and laws that deny consumers information feed mistrust. The farmers I know are proud of what they do and happy to show you around. Take all the pictures you want. If you want it to be

a crime to photograph your operation, what are you trying to hide?

Yes, there are a great many certifications out there. There are a lot of brands of chips on the store shelf too. None of the certifications are required if your customer trusts you. I certify organic. This covers most of it and is all I find I need. Many of these other certifications were created for producers who want the image of organic without adhering to the standards.

Lots of things are regulated by the government. Lots of paperwork does not mean the need is being met. Customers want safe, healthy, food and humane and environmentally sound farms. All that government paperwork does not mean our food is safe. So, the private sector steps in with the tools they have, certifications. Someone, for a fee, will take those pictures the ag-gag laws hide.

Jonathan Spero
Grants Pass, Ore.

OUR VIEW

Conservation elite doesn't find locals to be adequate stewards of public lands

How much value should decision makers give to the opinions of rural residents of southeast Oregon who oppose the creation of a 2.5 million acre national monument in their backyard? Not much, according to a leading activist and lobbyist for environmental causes.

Backed by the Oregon Natural Desert Association and the owner of Portland's Keen Footwear, the proposed Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness and conservation area would cover 40 percent of Oregon's Malheur County — about 2.5 million acres of what is now controlled by the Bureau of Land Management.

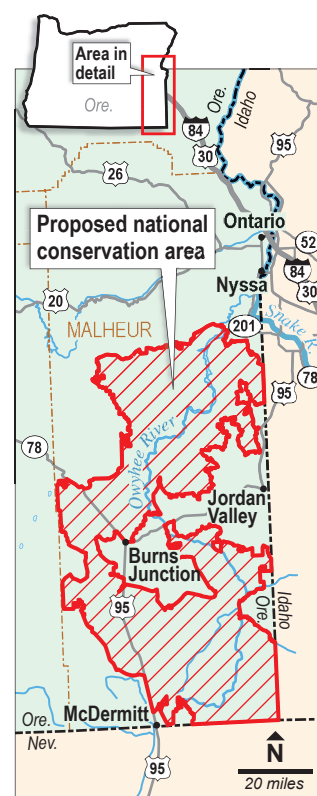
Earlier this month voters in Malheur County voted 9-to-1 against the proposal in a special election. The results carry no legal weight. And not much weight at all, according to Andy Kerr.

"All the voters in Malheur County easily fit into three and a half precincts in Multnomah County," he told OPB's "Think Out Loud" March 15 from studios in Washington, D.C. "There are more members of the Audubon Society, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and Oregon Wild individually than all the voters in Malheur County."

Kerr made a passionate case that the "national park-grade" wilderness should be protected in the long-term national interest.

That's easy to say from Washington, Portland or any other place whose economic vitality is not tied to those 2.5 million acres.

The people of Malheur



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

County believe they've been good stewards of the public lands in their corner of the state since they began caring for it more than a century ago. It's their home. Beyond it being the right thing to do, their economic self-interest depends that they do so.

Residents believe the designation would be accompanied by restrictions and regulations that would prohibit or severely complicate grazing, mining, hunting and recreation. In short, the lifeblood of their community.

But Kerr and his confederates believe the locals are there only to exploit and trample the land. It is from the people of Malheur County that the Owyhee must be protected.

"Proximity does not give license to abuse federal resources," he said.

And they wonder why people are angry.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.