

Poll: Americans favor farmers and food during drought

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Associated Press



Chris Carlson/AP Photo

In this Nov. 14, 2006, file photo, a worker adjusts the irrigation system that borders the Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge in Calipatria, Calif. When water gets scarce and the government slaps restrictions on its use, farmers should be first in line at the spigot, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll released Monday, Aug. 3, 2015.

LOS ANGELES — When water gets scarce and the government slaps restrictions on its use, who should be first in line at the spigot? Farmers, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll.

The national survey provides a glimpse into how Americans think water should be managed at a time when abnormally dry weather has afflicted swaths of the country, and water shortages in some states have led to conflict over who should get water and how much.

Two-thirds of Americans believe water is a limited resource that can be depleted if people use too much, the poll found, and 70 percent believe that government should restrict how much residents and businesses use when drought takes hold.

When asked to rate the importance of competing needs when water is scarce, 74 percent said agriculture should be a top or high priority, followed by residential needs (66 percent), wildlife and ecosystems (54 percent) and business and industry (42 percent).

To Cheryl Hendricks in parched California, it's simple: To put food on the table "we rely on agriculture."

"It's getting kind of serious when you are not giving water to people who are producing food," said Hendricks, 63, of Rancho Cucamonga, about 40 miles east of downtown Los Angeles.

She and her husband are taking shorter showers and removing lawn in response to California's four-year drought, but for

growers and ranchers "it's more important for them to have it."

Important for farms

The poll's findings appear to run against criticism of farming practices that demand vast amounts of water. In California, for example, agriculture accounts for 80 percent of all water drawn from rivers, streams and the ground. Producing California's almond crop consumes more water than all the showering, dish-washing and other indoor household water use of the state's 39 million people.

The drought has been acute in California, where rainfall has dipped to record lows, reservoirs are depleted and state regulators have ordered conservation from

cities, businesses and agriculture. Some communities have been given nine months to cut their use by 36 percent compared to 2013 levels.

Nevada's Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the country, is hovering near its historic low water mark and residents in the Las Vegas area have limits on lawn watering. In Oakridge in western Oregon, a community well is 23 feet below normal and restrictions prevent residents from washing cars and filling swimming pools.

"We need to take care of people first — and food," said William Clarke-Jessimy, 33, from Queens, N.Y., who thinks homes and agriculture should be favored for water rights.

He's watched prices spike

for California fresh fruits and vegetables in his local markets, and he worries about friends and family in the San Francisco area who are living with the scarcity of water, with no relief in sight.

"It's really scary," he said. "They need to find ways to deal with the drought on a long-term basis. I don't think a lot of people realize how bad it really is."

Earlier this month, the House passed Republican-backed legislation designed to bring more water to California's farm belt.

Republicans have blamed some cutbacks on environmental regulations designed to protect salmon and the threatened Delta smelt, a three-inch-long fish that is disappearing. California Democratic U.S. Sen. Dianne

Feinstein has proposed spending \$1.3 billion over a decade for reservoirs, desalination projects and water recycling.

According to the survey, Republicans are slightly more likely than Democrats to call water for agriculture a top priority, 81 percent to 74 percent, respectively. Democrats were more likely than Republicans to see water for wildlife and ecosystems as a top need, 61 percent to 49 percent.

There was little variation in regions around the nation in picking top priorities.

Limit developers

The poll also found most Americans — nearly 80 percent — think government should

limit developers to building only in places with an adequate, long-term water supply.

The advocacy group Food & Water Watch has urged Gov. Jerry Brown to place a moratorium on groundwater use for irrigating crops in some parts of the heavily farmed San Joaquin Valley. California director Adam Scow said the poll's findings reflect that people value food production but the group believes "we simply don't have the water" to support crops in some drought stricken regions.

David Abbott has witnessed the toll in his hometown.

The resident of Winton, Calif., in the heart of the state's Central Valley farm belt, has seen fields turn to dusty patches and farm workers end up jobless. Friends' wells have gone dry.

In California, farmers have seen allocations of water from rivers and reservoirs slashed by government agencies in amounts greater than at any other time in California history, forcing many to tap depleted groundwater sources or buy it at high prices.

Abbott, 27, a part-time college business professor, places home use and the needs of agriculture on about equal footing. For his part, he's watering less outdoors at home, has changed shower heads to conserve and waits to get a full load of dirty laundry before turning on the washing machine.

"I know it's hard when we don't have water," said Abbott, who lives amid farms and almond orchards. "They say we are going to have a real wet winter, but I don't think that's going to be enough."

In drought, Pacific Northwest cities, farms face water cuts

Associated Press

PORTLAND — A deepening drought in the Pacific Northwest is forcing some cities, farms and state agencies to cut back on water use.

Eleven cities and towns across Oregon have imposed some form of water conservation, The Oregonian reported. Those range from simply asking residents to exercise restraint to threatening \$300 fines for anyone who turns on the hose without permission.

Lake Oswego wants residents to aim for a 10 percent reduction in water use, and a water conservationist is going house to house to help people craft water-

ing plans that keeps plants alive with minimal irrigation. The city, which takes its water from the Clackamas River, said it isn't running out, but cutting use is "just responsible," said the city's water conservation coordinator, Kevin McCaleb.

In Portland, Water Bureau officials said they expect to avoid citywide cutbacks this year, but the reservoir which supplies Portland's municipal water is 3 billion gallons short of its average July supply. To make up the difference, water managers are pumping groundwater from wells near the Columbia River.

And in Ashland, city workers are carpeting street me-

dians with artificial turf and offering cash incentives for residents who swap their lawns for drought-hardy landscapes.

"We're really focused on making the long-term changes that will help us in the future," said Julie Smitherman, Ashland's water conservation specialist.

The situation is most dire in Oakridge and Junction City, where water levels in wells have dropped significantly. In both cities, it's now illegal to water lawns and gardens outside of approved dates and times. Those who don't comply face fines.

That approach is now common in California, which is in the fourth year of the drought.

California's governor has ordered a 25 percent statewide reduction in urban water use compared to 2013, leading communities to limit lawn watering, impose fines and add drought penalties to water bills to dissuade consumption.

Earlier this week in Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown ordered all state agencies to limit water use in an effort to reduce the state government's water budget by 15 percent over the next five years.

Diana Enright of the Oregon Water Resources Department said the agency is sharpening its focus on long-term water conservation, given the strong evidence that Oregon's days

of abundant snowpack and comfortable summers are numbered.

"West of the Cascades, we see Oregon — and the rest of the country sees Oregon — as a rainy place," Enright said. "If it's not that rainy, snowy place anymore, what does that new world look like?"

Brown has also declared drought emergencies in 23 of Oregon's 36 counties, a move that grants the state water department greater authority to regulate water rights and qualifies farmers and ranchers for federal assistance.

In Washington state, several cities including Seattle, Everett and Tacoma have activated

water shortage plans. And in Vancouver, B.C., residents are forbidden from watering plants or washing cars.

Some farm irrigators have also been told to use less water. Surface water irrigators along the Klamath Basin's Sprague River have been told to turn off their spigots. Anyone else in the basin with water rights obtained after 1905 has been regulated off to save water for senior water users.

And three irrigation districts — two in Hood River and one in Corbett — have asked or ordered their members to use less.

Agriculture and industry make up the bulk of the state's total water use, officials said.

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