

WATER CONSERVATION

Water and Food Debate:

The Future of Imperial Valley, California

To say that a person's second home with a pool in the back and a fountain in the front is somehow more valuable than growing alfalfa to produce milk that feeds our children is ludicrous.

— Heidi Kuhn, Dairy Farmer in Imperial Valley, California

Debate Issue: *The farms in California's Imperial Valley take too much water for the economic benefits they generate. Moving forward, these farms should either be diminished or they should curtail their water use. The resulting water surplus could go to the growing residential communities that need it.*

California's Imperial Valley, which borders Mexico and Arizona, receives three inches of rain a year and yet is the self-proclaimed "winter vegetable capital of the world." The production of alfalfa, broccoli, cauliflower, daikon radishes, and more, on the half-million acres of farmland generates over \$1.2 billion in total annual sales. To achieve such harvests, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID), the principal water utility in the region, draws 3.1 million acre-feet each year from the Colorado River, or about 75 percent of the state's annual allocation from the river.

In 2003, the IID engaged in the largest ever sale of water from farms to cities when it guaranteed rights for up to 200,000 acre-feet annually for the next 45-75 years to San Diego—but not without bitter protest from Imperial Valley farmers. This "sale" was spurred by the city's momentous growth—with 3 million people now in the Metro area, San Diego's population has quadrupled since 1950. "People always get water over crops" especially when "they can afford much better lawyers," says Eric Natwick, Director and Entomology Advisor for the Imperial County Cooperative Extension. Currently, San Diego gets half its water from the Colorado River, 15 percent from local sources, and 35 percent piped in from



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Northern California. This last source relies upon snow melt from the Sierra Nevada mountains, a supply that dwindles as warmer temperatures bring more rain than snow.

Imperial Valley's current water habits are worth addressing. According to the Building Industry Association of San Diego County, 85 percent of California's water supply is consumed by agriculture; in the Imperial Valley, fully 97 percent of the water is consumed by agriculture. (Nationally, just 34 percent of all water withdrawals go to irrigation.) Yet, despite this glut of water, California's food and animal production in 2006 accounted for less than 2 percent of the state's economic output. Add to this that some water-thirsty crops are government-subsidized, like alfalfa, which needs about 75 inches of water per year and receives 35 percent of the Imperial Valley's water, and the need for change is evident.

This brings challenges to the thousands of farmers in Imperial Valley who have had to cut water supplies by 30 percent since the 2003 diversions to San Diego. This has meant that avocado trees have to be stumped, cotton growing has been abolished, and fields must go fallow. Meanwhile, 22 percent of the region's residents live below the poverty line, and unemployment stands at 17.1 percent, compared with the state's average of 6.2 percent. In the off-season there is heavy reliance upon food stamps; in the winter, the Mexican border regularly sees mile-long lines of day laborers crossing over to work the fields. Even so, the county's population is still growing.

Southern California is embroiled in an extremely complicated and vital conflict of supply and demand. More people need more food, which takes more of a dwindling supply of water to produce. Still, farmers pay a fraction of what residents do for water. But before giving up on farming in the Imperial Valley altogether, Natwick points to the danger of becoming reliant upon, say, the emerging agrarian powerhouse of Brazil. He likens this to the current energy crisis, with U.S. dependence on foreign oil and subjugation to the changes in international markets.

All of these factors are further addressed in the articles linked below, which will better inform your stance on this volatile debate issue. Using what you have learned from all the sources provided to you, enter into a discussion over the Debate Issue at the beginning of this document.



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Pro:

- California takes more than its allotment of Colorado River water:
http://www.pacinst.org/topics/water_and_sustainability/salton_sea/ca_water_grab.htm
- The Environmental Defense Fund says water can be transferred in an economically feasible manner.
<http://www.edf.org/article.cfm?contentID=3494>
- The Building Association of San Diego promotes their plans for efficient water use:
http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/12/09/perspective/6_56_1012_8_07.txt

Con:

- Two overviews of the water transfer to San Diego, with several perspectives from farmers who stand to lose:
http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/state/20030930-9999_1n30water.html
<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/20080804-9999-1n4agwater.html>
- Local farms have many environmental benefits:
<http://www.farmwater.org/Educator-Resources/Farm-Water-and-the-Environment.html>
- Ethanol could potentially redeem the Imperial Valley's economy and change the face of agriculture there:
<http://westernfarmpress.com/news/091007-California-ethanol/>
- A way to farm with less water:
http://www.pacinst.org/reports/more_with_less_delta/index.htm

