

Water situation affects fresh fruits, vegetable availability for those in need

By Larry Sly

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The drought we are currently experiencing raises serious questions about how we use a finite resource.

The Mediterranean climate we enjoy means that we have long summers where no rain falls. In normal years, the snow that falls in the Sierra Nevada mountains has been our reservoir and provides the water we need in the summer. Much of the water is needed for agriculture because California has some of the most productive soil in the world. Our water system works well as long as snow falls in the mountains, but when a drought takes place, competition begins for the limited water available.

Residential consumers are urged to limit the amount of water they use. We may have green lawns and swimming pools, but many homes have drip irrigation, low-water landscaping, low-flow toilets and other technology to make effective use of the water they use. There are debates about how you compute the numbers, but urban water use is less than 20 percent of the total consumed in California. One third of the water used in the state goes for environmental purposes; making sure rivers have adequate fresh water to support a healthy environment. More than half the water the state consumes is used for agricultural purposes.

Residential consumers often wish that water could be saved in the agricultural and environmental areas.

Some people argue that using "environmental" water to preserve fish should take second place to water for agriculture. The looming battle over the bypass tunnels proposed to move fresh water from rivers above the San Joaquin/Sacramento delta raises concerns about the impact that action would have on the environment of our local area. If we decide that environmental and urban uses are most important, what does that mean for agriculture?

Agriculture is a major part of California's economy. California farms and ranches generate more than \$42 billion worth of revenue. Of that revenue, more than \$18 billion is food we export to other countries. More than 1 percent of the food produced in the United States comes from California, and more than half the fruits, nuts and vegetables consumed in the United States are grown in California. Our climate and our water make a major contribution to California's economy and the nation's food supply.

The work of the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano is possible to a certain extent because we are located in California. Because food grown in California sometimes does not meet marketing standards, the Food Bank can reclaim that food, allowing us to provide fresh produce to people in need in our community.

Because of the drought, some of the crops we received in past years are not available to us currently, plus everything we receive costs more. Fresh fruits and vegetable prices will go up an estimated 6 percent in the coming months according to the federal government.

In order to get the food we need, we depend on agriculture, and agriculture depends on water. Difficult decisions need to be made both by government and at home as we decide how we can best use the water on which we all depend, so people of all income levels have access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

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