

Issue Alert

Shrinking Water Supplies Threaten National Security

Western Agriculture At Risk From Climate
Change And Competing Water Demands

On the same day a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study was released, warning that the availability of agricultural water is finite, Western irrigators met in Las Vegas and expressed concerns about climate change, shrinking agricultural water supplies and an uncertain future.

The Family Farm Alliance kicked off its 19th Annual Meeting and Conference on February 21st, and the discussions that swirled around at the conference were very similar to the topics addressed in the NAS study.

“Farming is national security,” Patrick O’Toole

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Family Farm Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen (left) and President Pat O’Toole join others attending the Alliance’s 19th Annual Meeting and Conference in visiting Hoover Dam.

Supply Shrinkage Threatens Farming

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(WYOMING), President of the Alliance, told conference attendees. "Urbanization and competition for water supplies are driving Western farmers off the land at a time when American food production in general is following other industries off-shore in search of lower costs. This existing problem will only be compounded if future Western water supplies are diminished by a changing climate."

THE REPORT Wednesday (February 21) by a National Research Council committee says

"Farmers and ranchers produce food, steward the land, and tie down open space from development. The renewable economic and ecologic values they provide are superior to those associated with other uses of the land. Ag land and its related values are disappearing at an alarming rate."

Dr. Richard L. Knight
 Dep't of Forest, Rangeland & Watershed Stewardship
 Colorado State University
 Before the Family Farm Alliance 2007 Conference

agriculture is the likeliest target for shifting use to urban needs in the fast growing West.

But it cautions that "the availability of agricultural water is finite." It adds that rising population and water demands "will inevitably result in increasingly costly, controversial and unavoidable trade-off choices" in managing a shrinking resource.

The latest report – which focuses on the controversial Colorado River – offers up findings that are similar to those made by another speaker at the Alliance conference.

DR. ROBERT BALLING JR., a professor in the climatology program at Arizona State University, on Thursday (February 22) spoke to the

Alliance meeting and addressed projected climate change impacts for runoff from the Salt and Verde River systems in Arizona.

He said, "Every model says warming will occur. There is no doubt the world has warmed up."

"The overall results from our work suggest that the runoff from the Salt and Verde will have approximately an 85% chance of being less in the future due largely to warming in the study area," said Dr. Balling.

The NRC Colorado River report recommended that another study be undertaken of water use patterns and demands, population projections and possible effects of transferring water from agriculture to urban areas. The latter recommendation is one the Family Farm Alliance in 2006 asked a U.S. Department of Agriculture advisory committee to implement.

"We need a realistic assessment of the collective impacts of agricultural land and water changes in western states over the last 10 years, as well as predicted trends," said Alliance Executive Director Dan Keppen (OREGON). "Colorado alone lost an average of 460 acres per day of ag land between 1987 and 2002. A study of this sort may provide the type of hard findings that can help wake up policy makers to the big picture importance of this issue."

O'Toole echoed these sentiments over the course of the three-day conference held in Las Vegas last week.

"Ironically, it's because Western irrigated agriculture has been so adaptive and successful at providing plentiful, safe and affordable food that it is now jeopardized – nobody believes there can be a problem," said O'Toole, "When the issue has never been personalized, it's easy to be complacent."