

California enters third year of severe drought

By Gabriel Black
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California has begun a third year of a progressively severe drought, which some experts have warned will be the worst in the state's recorded history. The drought is both a natural and a social disaster, with the impact of declining rainfall and snowfall greatly exacerbated by the lack of any seriously organized response under the profit system.

A lack of rational planning and infrastructure investment will make the drought a devastating experience for hundreds of thousands of agriculture workers, farmers, and ranchers—most of whom were already experiencing extremely difficult conditions.

Presently, over two-thirds of California's counties are in "extreme" or "exceptional" drought; conditions which on average occur every 20 to 50 years. California's snow pack is a staggering 12 percent of its average for this time of year, the lowest ever recorded. Usually the state's 40 largest reservoirs are 64 percent full in February; instead they are just at 39 percent capacity.

In response to worsening conditions, Governor Jerry Brown has shut down the State Water Project. The 40-year-old project moves snowmelt water through hundreds of miles of pipes, supplying water to 25 million Californians and 750,000 acres of farmland. Several hundred thousand people, particularly in the eastern and southern part of the Bay Area, will be shut off from their primary source of water due to its closure.

Without water, farmers across the state are being forced to plant fewer crops. According to *Bloomberg News* there could be a 500,000-acre reduction in planting this year. This would result in a whopping 12 percent drop in California's farm output purely from not planting.

Agriculture workers, ranchers, and small farm owners will be the greatest victims of this disaster.

Large numbers of farm workers will simply be unable

to find work. Those who do will face sharp downward pressures on their living conditions. Cries have also begun from the far-right to deport undocumented immigrants, who, according to *downtrend.com*, are "straining" the water supply.

In the agriculture town of Mendota, Fresno County, California, the average per-person income in 2012 was \$8,947; 45 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Last time a major drought hit, official unemployment surged to nearly 50 percent. This year could be much worse. Fresno County, the top grossing agriculture county in California, will lay fallow a full quarter of its cropland.

Ranchers and dairies will also be severely impacted. These operations rely heavily off of rain-fed grassland. Milk is currently California's top agriculture commodity, a lesser portion of which involves grazing cows. Cattle and calving are California's fifth most lucrative agricultural pursuit. In 1977, the year of California's previous worst drought, about three-quarters of the total economic loss was from livestock.

A drought makes it impossible for ranchers to rear their livestock and tend to their land properly. Kevin Kester, president of the Californian Cattleman's Beef Association, told a cattle conference in early February that "purchasing hay is unsustainable financially." Speaking about ranchers he knew in California "[they] are selling most or all of their cows because they don't have any other options. Unfortunately, there will be way too many of them that will end up going out of business permanently."

Over 80 percent of the state's water supply goes to agriculture; however, municipalities throughout California will also be directly affected. Seventeen different communities and water districts are expected to run out of water in the next three months, forcing emergency conservation measures and well-drilling.

The drought's effect will ripple out internationally. Food prices are expected to climb—a rise to be exacerbated by financial speculation. Wall Street has already placed its first round of bets: milk futures went up by 19 percent in January alone.

Milt McGiffen, an expert on vegetable production at the University of California Riverside, told *Bloomberg News* that “artichokes, celery, broccoli and cauliflower could rise [by] at least 10 percent” in the coming months.

State officials have long understood the grave dangers, and likelihood, of a severe drought. In 1978, the state's comprehensive water report warned “drought will return, and, considering the greater needs of that future time, its impact, unless prepared for, will be much greater.” At the time, California had just finished the worst drought ever recorded in the state (1976-77). Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of crops and jobs (billions in today's dollars) were wiped out.

Twenty years later, in 2001, the state drafted a similar report whose foreword, again warns, “it is essential that California prepare for the return of very dry conditions.” However, the state did nothing substantial to prepare for these expected conditions.

The majority of the state's agriculture system uses ditch irrigation and flooding techniques. This archaic watering method, found in Ancient Egypt and Babylon, is the least efficient method to deliver water to crops. Drip water systems for tree crops and overhead sprinklers for tilled crops would dramatically reduce water usage throughout the state.

According to *Newsweek*, in pioneering trials in Californian towns, water delivery technologies have increased food output by 30 percent while simultaneously decreasing water usage by the same percent. Considering that more than 80 percent of California's water goes to agriculture, a systematic improvement in watering techniques would have profound ramifications for water conservation.

In the face of the series of crisis warnings, the California Department of Food and Agriculture's general fund shrank from \$99.1 million to \$60.29 million from 2011 to 2013—a reduction of more than 30 percent. Even in the midst of devastating drought, Governor Brown's current budget proposal cuts the actual general fund allocated for the CDFA slightly

from the estimated 2013-14 figure of \$63.78 million to the 2014-15 allocation of \$63.14 million.

In response to the ongoing crisis, the Obama administration has offered a one-time relief package of \$180 million. In fact, \$100 million of this aid is already due to California ranchers via the farm bill. Obama's promise was merely to speed up the payment. Some of the money will go to food banks in the economically decimated parts of the state.

Governor Brown has also announced the state's aid: a \$687 million aid bill that will speed up the completion of short-term water fixes, as well as support food banks. Like Obama's “aid,” the vast majority of the bill's funds were already allocated. They will now be “expedited.”

The indifference of both state and federal governments is a slap in the face to farm workers, small farmers and ranchers throughout California. The money going to the food banks is essentially a small handout designed to keep the workforce alive. How else will the hundreds of thousands of agriculture workers facing unemployment rates upwards of 50 percent and average incomes below \$10,000 survive for the following work season?

By comparison, the combined state and federal drought aid is roughly equivalent to the lifetime cost of one single F-35 fighter, estimated at \$769 million.

Tens of billions of dollars are needed to revolutionize the decayed and antiquated infrastructure and technical means used by farmers. The resources exist: a single California billionaire, Larry Ellison, net worth \$41 billion, could pay for it by himself.

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