

Facing Realities of Water Limitations in the Western US

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Dan Keppen is Executive Director for the Family Farm Alliance, a non-profit association that advocates for family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in 17 Western States. He has thirty-three years of experience in Western water resources engineering and policy matters. Since 1997, he has worked primarily in advocacy positions with the Northern California Water Association, and as executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association. He served one year as special assistant to the Director of the Bureau of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific Region. Prior to that time, Keppen was a water resources engineer for Tehama County, California and a water resources engineering consultant in Portland, Oregon.

He was invited to represent the Alliance at the 2016 White House Water Summit. He is a registered civil engineer in California, and a past registered civil engineer and water rights examiner in Oregon. He is a past board member of the Irrigation Association and Clean Water Alliance (now U.S. Water Alliance), a past president of the Klamath County Chamber of Commerce, and a board member of the Klamath County Rotary Club. He is a Rotary Club Paul Harris (+8) Fellow and Senior Fellow of the American Leadership Forum of Oregon. He received his M.S. in Water Resources Engineering from Oregon State University and his B.S. in Petroleum Engineering from the University of Wyoming.

Water is the key to the American West. Food security is as vital to our homeland security as our nation's other strategic interests, and the production of food and fiber on Western irrigated lands is critical to our nation's ability to feed itself. The 2010 Global Agricultural Productivity Report first quantified the difference between the current rate of agricultural productivity growth and the pace required to meet future world food needs. The report predicted total global agricultural output would have to be doubled by 2050 to meet the food needs of a growing global population. In July 2022, the State of Food and Nutrition in the World report showed after years of seeing global hunger numbers drop, it is back at record levels and rising. World leaders fear global price spikes in food, fuel and fertilizers will lead to widespread famine, prompting global destabilization, starvation and mass migration on an unprecedented scale.

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country last July, days after thousands of protesters stormed his residence over the nation's crippling economic crisis. Domestic food production also took a hit by the government's April 2021 decision to ban importation of chemical fertilizers and agrichemicals, in an apparent shift to organic agriculture. By the time the ban was partially reversed in November, farmers reported a 40-50% loss in rice crops.

Back in the U.S.A., a bewildering set of forces appear to be aligned against keeping domestic agricultural lands in production. Arizona and California are paving over and compromising productive farmland at the fastest rate in the U.S. Elsewhere, conservation groups are quietly scooping up hundreds of thousands of farm and ranch acres with the help of billionaire donors and the federal government. Between 690,000 and 800,000 acres of California farmland will go fallow this year. Undoubtedly, the Western drought has reduced the amount of water for many users, including irrigated agriculture. However, in places like California and Oregon, much of the water that once flowed to farms and ranches is currently being re-directed by the federal government for environmental purposes. In the Colorado River Basin, competing interests have mounted a sustained campaign on agricultural water use, and often point to alfalfa as an example of one crop using too much water and should no longer be produced.

At a time when the future of Ukraine and other country's ability to help feed the outside world is at risk, our ability to increase productivity is being further curtailed – due in part, to our own government and competing demands. The grim global hunger conditions we once expected to encounter in 2050 may now hit us decades sooner. This session seeks to explain this critical issue further, as a growing number of faraway critics downplay and even criticize the importance of using water to produce affordable and safe food and fiber.