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Ag Water NetWORK

How Important is Food and Water Security?

Preserving Irrigated Ag Land Helps Ensure Both

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Empty store shelves – something rarely seen in America – have been commonplace since the coronavirus outbreak. Consumer stockpiling of food and goods has led to shortages that extend far beyond the media favorite - toilet paper. Staple food products like ground beef, chicken, beans, bread, tortillas and potatoes are in short supply in supermarkets and warehouse clubs. Even dog food has not been spared. The unfolding Covid-19 crisis has led some urbanites to drive out to rural areas to purchase food from small town grocery stores – even buying potatoes directly from growers in the San Luis Valley.

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed systemic vulnerabilities ranging from medical response readiness to food availability. US food security is heavily dependent upon just-in-time shipping. Our reliance on food brought in daily from around the country and the world has, at times, left shoppers waiting for the next truckload of food or paper products to arrive.

Widespread panic-buying has underscored people's desire to be food secure. Real food security starts with being able to grow, process and market food locally. Community sustainability is impossible without a reliable food production system close at hand. In arid Colorado, preserving irrigated farmland near cities and in rural areas is key to ensuring food and dairy staples can be produced and provided to consumers even during a crisis.

Irrigated potatoes in the San Luis Valley
Photo: Christi Bode, MoxieCran Media

Preventing widespread loss of additional irrigated farmland requires a recognition of the enormous value that agricultural land provides to society. Growth and corresponding demands for land and municipal and industrial water has led to the loss of about 700,000 acres of irrigated agricultural land since 1995. That number is based on a comparison of irrigated acreages in the 1995-96 and 2018 National Agricultural Statistics Service reports for Colorado. About 2.5 million acres of irrigated agricultural land remain, which is less than 4 percent of our state's total land area.

In Colorado, the old adage is that 'water flows toward money.' Historically, housing developments have provided a much better return on investment than farming and ranching. Water has flowed toward municipal growth and away from agriculture in a paradox that finds our growing population requiring more food while our most productive agriculture acreage is being diminished.

Beyond just food production, farm fields and ranchland offer visual and emotional relief to urban dwellers trying to practice social distancing while dealing with family, work and health issues. Agricultural land also plays a key role in supporting rare wildlife species including sage grouse, prairie chicken and mountain plover, as well as more common ones like elk, deer, antelope, fox, bear, mountain lion, turkey, burrowing owls and many others. Grain fields and irrigation ditches and ponds provide rest stops for migrating birds, including sand hill cranes. And return flows from irrigated fields support stream flows and aquatic life in dryer summer months.

Sandhill cranes in the San Luis Valley
Photo: Christi Bode, MoxieCran Media

Irrigated agricultural land offers a solution to both food and water security in Colorado. Laws passed since the 2002-03 drought enable water leasing between farms and cities. Interruptible supply agreements, 3/10 year water leases, ag water protection rights and multi-use water right adjudication with or without conservation easements provide opportunities for agricultural producers to lease water to cities while keeping land in production. The Ag Water NetWORK's 2016 survey of farmers and ranchers found that 60 percent had some level of interest in leasing their water. The preferred type of lease arrangement was 'reduced delivery,' where a percentage of water was leased and the producer was free to utilize the remaining portion of water to maximize crop or forage production.

Agricultural preservation and water leasing can even play an important role in stream restoration and watershed management by providing water for aquatic life, recreation and municipal use while preserving ag and forest land for wildlife and watershed protection.

If there is a silver lining to the coronavirus cloud, it is that the importance of food security has been brought to the fore. The great news is that – unlike the reactionary responses required for dealing with Covid-19 – Colorado has time to plan and implement strategies that preserve irrigated agricultural land, help farmers diversify their income, and supply water for cities, fish and wildlife, and recreation.

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The mission of Colorado Cattlemen's Ag Water NetWORK is to help 'keep ag water connected with ag land.' Phil Brink, Brink, Inc, is the Consulting Coordinator of Colorado Cattlemen's Ag Water NetWORK. Phil can be reached at phil@brinkinc.biz or 720-887-9944.