

THE CALIFORNIA FARM WATER COALITION:  
TELLING THIRSTY CALIFORNIANS WHY AGRICULTURE  
NEEDS WATER

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ABSTRACT

The allocation of water for agricultural use in the western United States is currently being called into question. This scrutiny is most keen in California, a state with more than nine million acres of irrigated farmland. Rapidly growing urban demands and calls for environmental restoration are placing increasing pressure on existing water supplies, while the development of new supplies is both expensive and politically unpalatable.

This convergence of new demands and stagnation in the development of new supplies is fueling an all out assault on farmers' water rights. For the first time in this century, farmers across the West are facing the question of whether their legal water rights are the secure property rights they once were considered to be.

The California Farm Water Coalition was formed in 1989 to give agriculture a voice in the highly charged debate on water allocation now underway in California. Farmers and agricultural water district officials believe that agriculture's single largest enemy is public apathy and ignorance over the industry's use of water and the benefits that water use creates. The Farm Water Coalition strives to educate the public and policy makers about agricultural water use. The Coalition's mission is based on the belief that informed policy makers will make good decisions.

THE COALITION'S ROLE

For the past six years, an ongoing drought, coupled with burgeoning population growth, has stretched California's water supplies to the limit. Consequently, a great deal of attention has been focused on the state's water allocation and distribution policies. As headline after headline proclaimed that agriculture receives 80 percent of the developed water

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supply, while contributing only three percent of the state's economy, farmers found themselves to be the target for proponents of water reallocation. These proponents argue that if agriculture did without 10 percent of its water supply, all of the state's water needs could be met.

As cries of "reallocation," "water transfers," and "water marketing" emerged, farm water managers throughout the state recognized that the industry had to go on the offensive. Something had to be done to counteract the misinformation about farm water use in order to preserve agriculture's water supply.

As a result of a series of meetings among agricultural water managers and industry representatives, the California Farm Water Coalition, a non-profit organization, was incorporated in July, 1989. The Coalition is governed by a Board of Directors selected from among prominent agricultural leaders concerned about water policy. The Board meets monthly and provides guidance for the Coalition's staff and consultants.

The Coalition receives its funding from voluntary sources. Local water districts throughout California contribute on a voluntary basis to the Coalition with annual dues of \$0.10 per irrigable acre. Additional funding is received from agribusinesses and allied industries, as well as individual donations.

For three years, the California Farm Water Coalition has taken its education message to three specific publics: the media, elected representatives and policy makers, and the business community. These audiences are key in terms of the water policy debate and the Coalition focuses on these groups with information that is accurate, timely and relevant to the issues at hand.

## PROGRAM AND EVALUATION

Because of limited time and resources, the Coalition assessed early-on the areas in which it could be most effective. Through this evaluation process the Coalition concluded that its efforts should focus on three distinct publics: the media, elected representatives and policy makers, and the business community. These three publics are critical in terms of providing input into the water policy debate in California.

### The Media

The California media have given water issues, ranging from agricultural drainage to salmon spawning habitat, considerable coverage. Water issues are covered by a cadre of beat reporters who cover the issue on a full-time basis. Additionally, most of the major urban dailies have editorial writers who specialize on the subject.

As the primary disseminator of information to the public, the media was identified by the Farm Water Coalition as a critical audience to receive agriculturally oriented information. Articles and editorials appear daily in California and national publications, many of which contain misinformation about agriculture's water use. The Coalition counters on a daily basis any erroneous and misleading statements. Through direct contacts with reporters, letters to the editor, and the submission of opinion-editorial pieces, the Coalition has been able to build a good working relationship with the media. Through these relationships, the Coalition attempts to create awareness and trust. Reporters and editors call the Farm Water Coalition on a regular basis, and recognize that the organization is able to speak on behalf of agriculture with respect to water issues.

The Coalition regularly provides agricultural spokespersons for both print and electronic media. Last year, the Coalition was selected to represent the agricultural perspective on a "Good Morning America" segment on the California water crisis. Also, the Coalition has been invited to provide guest editorials in leading newspapers throughout the state.

The Coalition now is recognized as a leading resource for reporters on water issues. Its goal is to provide facts and figures to all requests for information. The Coalition also has developed position papers supporting the development of California's groundwater banks, off-stream storage reservoirs and Delta transfer facilities as a means of better water management for the state.

#### Elected Representatives and Policy Makers

The Coalition subscribes to the theory that people will make rational decisions if they have adequate information regarding all of the facts. Consequently, elected representatives and policy makers are a targeted audience for the Coalition's efforts.

The Coalition uses a two-pronged approach in working with elected representatives and policy makers. It believes that personal contacts with decision-makers, as well as public addresses to key audiences is important in delivering its message to this defined audience.

The Coalition, at its monthly board meetings, invites members of the state legislature to discuss water issues as they relate to state policy issues. Additionally, the Coalition staff will conduct one-on-one meetings with elected representatives and their staffs as water issues emerge, and to educate them on the agricultural perspective. As a result of these efforts, the Coalition is called upon to deliver testimony to the state legislature on a variety of water issues. And because it speaks for agriculture generally, it has been called upon to prepare briefing papers for candidates at all levels of government, including the upcoming Presidential election.

In reaching policy makers and members of state agencies that impact water policy in this state, the Coalition uses its strategy of personal contact. It

also seeks opportunities to present its message in the public forum when key audiences are present. In 1991 alone, the Coalition delivered more than 56 speeches on topics ranging from agricultural water conservation to water marketing. Demand for Coalitions spokespersons is high and come from all over California, as well as other states.

The Coalition also reaches out to elected representatives and policy makers by sponsoring opportunities for discussion and consensus building. The Coalition has taken a lead role in developing solutions to the water problems California faces. Three-Way Meetings among agriculture, urban and environmental representatives have been sponsored by the Coalition to define potential solutions. The result of these discussions has been an increased trust of agriculture and the acknowledgement of the complex nature of the problem. These discussions are being followed closely and supported by Governor Pete Wilson's office and members of his staff.

### The Business Community

Agriculture has long enjoyed a good relationship with members of the business community; they are natural allies. Because agriculture and the business community share many of the same ideas and goals, business was identified as a principal public. Consequently, the Coalition has focused a portion of its educational efforts at this public.

The Coalition looks well beyond agribusiness and allied industries when addressing the business community, although its efforts started there. The Coalition dedicated a portion of its time to bring allied industries and business together with farmers to strengthen the voice for agricultural water. Farmers represent only three percent of California's population. By joining forces with all segments of the agriculture industry, its messages will be better heard.

The Coalition has responded to requests from the business community for information about agricultural water use. Increasingly, California businesses have become active in the water policy issues of the state. Therefore, it is mandatory that the Coalition provide updated information to these business leaders so that they, too, can make informed decisions.

The Coalition has addressed members of the business community in open forums. Also, the Coalition has written opinion pieces and placed advertorials in publications that are read by business leaders. Members of the business community also receive "Farm Water Facts," a bi-monthly newsletter published by the Coalition. This newsletter also is distributed to the media, elected representatives and policy makers, and members of the environmental community.

This is a time when farm unity is crucial, and the Coalition has formed an agricultural caucus, bringing together the combined interests of the entire industry to develop unified policies on such issues as water transfers and

agricultural conservation. These policies have been effective in galvanizing farm support behind a common position, and then communicating that position to their primary audiences.

The Coalition's educational efforts are conducted statewide, with no particular allegiance or alliance to one area of the state or one commodity. The Coalition represents farmers and water districts which rely on surface water, from local water projects, as well as those who buy water from the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, and those who supplement their supplies with groundwater.

## CONCLUSION

Since its inception, the California Farm Water Coalition has kept its basic mission: public education about agricultural water use. Through its programs, the Coalition has experienced numerous opportunities to educate key publics about the agriculture industry, its use of water, and how its water use benefits all of California.

By gaining a reputation as a credible representative of the agriculture industry, it has been invited to participate in discussions, round tables and seminars that deal with shaping water policy in California. As a result, agriculture has secured another seat at the table when policy is being discussed and has ensured that agriculture's opinion will be solicited when decisions are being made.

The Coalition is dedicated to continuing its efforts to ensure that reasonable water policies are developed for California, policies that are balanced and do not cause undue hardship on one segment of the water using population. California agriculture is an integral and essential part of the state's economy and it is crucial to the nation's ability to grow its own food and fiber. It makes a positive contribution to the nation's balance of trade, and its farmers are efficient users of water. Therefore, the Coalition will continue with its messages to ensure that water supplies for agriculture are preserved while finding means of increasing water supplies for environmental, urban and recreational uses.