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Waste Not: A Demand-side Solution for California's Water Troubles

The knives came during California's budget battle — literally. But there's still at least one big tussle in the Golden State left this year: solving the state's water crisis.

AFP/Getty Images
Every drop counts.

As the Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month, Gov. Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders are planning a big push to address water shortages in the state, which has suffered a three-year drought. Everything from new reservoirs to urban conservation efforts is being considered.

But a big lever, according to a new study out of the Oakland-based Pacific Institute, is getting farmers to use H2O more efficiently.

The finding is no great surprise. The Institute's co-founder Dr. Peter Gleick has long advocated a "soft path" for water (freeing up new supply by curbing waste). And he's been a critic of what he calls misinformation about the plight of Central Valley farmers. He says that they're getting more water than they claim, and that the causes for astronomical unemployment rates in some farm communities owes more to the recession and poverty than the drought.

What's interesting about the analysis is just how much the authors think a combination of irrigation technologies and management practices can save: 5.6 million acre-feet in an average year. That's 17% of all water used by California farmers, and more than twice the total the state's millions of city-dwellers could save if they wised up about their water use. It's also a whole lot more than the enormous desalination plant in Carlsbad, Calif. will produce when it comes online.

The report reiterates what demand-siders in both the water and energy debates have been saying for a long time: Spending money on capital-intensive projects (like desalination plants and huge solar arrays) makes little sense when there are cheaper and bigger opportunities in improving efficiency.

But just because efficiency's cheaper doesn't mean it will be easy. In the case of California's ag sector, the study's authors admit, lots will have to change — from state laws to the incentives farmers get for employing efficient irrigation methods.

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