

A Legacy of Monterey County Water Planning Protects Crops in Drought Years By Jim Bogart, Grower-Shipper Association of Central California

Last week the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced that California farmers and ranchers will most likely not receive a water allocation this spring, which could mean income losses of upwards of two billion dollars for Central Valley growers. Additionally, a variety of newspapers ranging from the San Jose Mercury to the Wall Street Journal have reported that California's drought is affecting lettuce plantings in the Central Valley. Our office has fielded numerous calls from people wondering what this means to Monterey County agriculture and our lettuce harvest.

While it's true that lettuce acreage in the Central Valley will be greatly diminished this spring due to the drought, that acreage is a very small percentage of western lettuce shipments. The Central Valley's lettuce seasons represent two transitional periods in the spring and fall. Many growers are currently adjusting their schedules so that they don't have to rely on Central Valley plantings this year. Other growers are budgeting to pay much more for water during their transitional period in the Central Valley. And, some local grower-shippers have never planted in the Central Valley and won't be affected at all.

This drought also doesn't significantly impact crops growing currently in the desert regions. This April lettuce harvesting will resume in the Salinas Valley, an area that is experiencing a drought but is also the beneficiary of smart water planning and conservation by previous generations. Problem-solving and collaboration between local farmers and government agencies has created water resources for Monterey County growers so that they don't depend on state or federal water projects. Over the past decade local agriculture has both reduced water use and increased production – a feat that owes great kudos to previous generations that focused on finding ways to conserve water.

Two man-made lakes were created through dams by the Monterey County Water Authority in the 1960's. These dams collect water in the rainy months, filling the lakes which then recharge wells throughout the Salinas Valley during the year. Forward thinking and planning by growers working with local government 50 years ago means that today Monterey County growers can feel confident that they'll have water for their crops, even in years when water resources in the reservoirs are low, as they are this year. Today we are still planning for our future water needs. Right now we're building a rubber dam on the Salinas River that will further recharge our wells and should be fully operational in early 2010.

Additionally, collaboration between growers and environmentalists led to the creation of one of the largest water recycling facilities designed for crop irrigation. As Monterey County's increase in housing and business development has pulled water away from the aquifers that recharge our wells, the threat of seawater intrusion has grown at a corresponding rate. In the 1980s locally conducted research proved that recycled water is safe for the irrigation of crops. Acting upon the results of this internationally recognized study, in 1992 the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control Agency and the Monterey

County Water Resources Agency formed a partnership to build a water recycling facility and distribution system to reduce the potential for seawater to seep into our underground aquifers. Today this facility can produce an average of 29.6 million gallons of recycled water, or one foot of water over 91 acres of land daily.

Monterey County crops continue to benefit from the water planning and financial investments of previous generations, making our “salad bowl of the world” independent of the federal water allocation and able to coordinate plantings and harvests in years when water shortages are affecting our neighbors in growing districts throughout the state. By no means are our water issues solved; we must continue to work toward balancing our water basin alongside our statewide partners, but thanks to our sustainable water sourcing infrastructure and the implementation of growing methods that conserve water, we predict that western lettuce shipments will continue at levels consistent with prior years. For more information about agriculture and water planning in Monterey County please contact me at (831) 755-1480 or jim@growershipper.com.