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The Positive Side of Agricultural Water Use

During the past two months, the *New York Times* published several articles critical of irrigators, each painting a grim picture on Western irrigation and water-use practices undertaken by farmers and ranchers. These articles do little to advance the public's knowledge about U.S. irrigators and conservation practices being adopted throughout the rural West, where, in many areas, communities are built.

Farmers and ranchers continue to be challenged to deliver food and biomass for the enormous global explosion of population we face. The United States must remain globally competitive, while ensuring a safe and reliable food supply for our current and future generations. We are poised to be the undisputed leader in meeting this challenge. In fact, according to a recent report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, in a 40-year period, we have doubled the productivity of agricultural water. And, according the United States Geological Survey, while the U.S. population has doubled, total water consumption has only increased by approximately 50 percent. This is an amazing testament to the stewardship and ingenuity of the American farmer and the effectiveness of farm bill programs.

United States Department of Agriculture partnerships have been and continue to be one of the driving factors behind that success.

The demand for food, feed, fuel and fiber supported by our nation's farmers and ranchers is at an all-time high, due to a growing global population, government mandates, and other pressures. At the same time, according to American Farmland Trust, we are losing an acre of farmland every minute.

It is clear that productivity gains associated with irrigation are not a luxury, they are a necessity.

Farmers and ranchers need to meet these demands with fewer resources and increased environmental regulatory responsibilities, within an ever-changing and uncertain climate. Many irrigators voluntarily engage in conservation practices that not only conserve water, but also meet these demands with improved efficiency. These hard working farmers and ranchers should be commended, not condemned, for their actions.

The *Times*, in its June 7, 2013, article, *Farm Subsidies Leading to More Water Use*, claims that "researchers believe that the new equipment may be speeding up the depletion of groundwater supplies, which are crucial to agriculture and as a source of drinking water." This statement contradicts a 2009 United States Geological Survey report which found that, even though the amount of irrigated acres throughout the United States has increased over time, irrigation application rates decreased steadily from 1950 to 2005. This report - rolled out by the Obama Administration - suggests that this success is directly attributed to the increased use of more efficient irrigation systems by irrigators.

In addition to the USGS study, the USDA's Economic Research Service states that the U.S. water application rate in irrigated agriculture declined by 20 percent between 1969 and 2003, a continuing trend that farmers and ranchers take pride in.

The theoretical policy solutions promoted by the *Times* article also ignore the complexity of the demands placed on irrigated agriculture. America is in the best position to feed our growing population, because our agriculture is the most efficient in the world. That, in part, is because our producers are savvy to market signals about which crops to produce, and because of their access to the best technologies on the planet.

Control of property in this country, including water rights, is a matter of state law and should remain that way. However, the programs managed by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service do an excellent job assisting growers by providing technical assistance to increase their efficiency of operations. They also provide a cost-share for projects that have a tangential environmental benefit. These programs are proven to work and are widely supported by conservation and agricultural groups alike.

We firmly believe in the work of the NRCS and believe their programs have net positive results, both for the environment and the agricultural producer.

Water conservation is a critical issue throughout the United States. We must do the most we can to conserve water, while recognizing that providing a healthy, safe and affordable food supply to a growing global population is a significant challenge requiring continued investment. One way to do this is through efficiency. Simply attacking agriculture and its infrastructure won't lead to a sustainable solution. We must continue to support efforts to answer the hard question the right way; namely, how to properly steward our water supply while sustaining our economy and protecting our liberty.

The farm bill conservation title provides a real value to the American taxpayer. It has helped advance our country's amazing agricultural productivity, at a time when other social and economic forces have already encroached on the farm footprint.

We appreciate the continued dialogue regarding water use by farmers and ranchers. We recognize that water is a precious resource that should never be wasted. This is why we believe that sound farm bill policy is more important today than ever before.

Signed,

Arizona Cattle Growers' Association
Association of California Water Agencies
California Agricultural Irrigation Association
California Farm Bureau Federation
Family Farm Alliance
Irrigation Association
Montana Stockgrowers Association
Public Lands Council
Wyoming Stockgrowers Association