

Water plentiful, drought signs dot Calif. roads

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Photos by Gosia Wozniacka

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FRESNO, Calif. – Drive on Highway 99 or Interstate 5 between San Francisco and Los Angeles, and you will see plastic banners scattered among wine tasting ads and billboards hawking the latest pesticide.

"Man-made drought," the banners draped across fences and cotton trailers proclaim in large, bold letters. "Congress-created dust bowl" and "Food grows where water flows."

The signs in the Central Valley, which provides many of the nation's fruits and vegetables, are a reminder of California's decades-old water war, a conflict stemming from large numbers of people living and farming in areas where the resource is scarce.

Some signs, put up by farmers long ago, are weathered from rain

and faded from sun. Several hundred others went up in recent weeks, courtesy of an advocacy group for farmers.

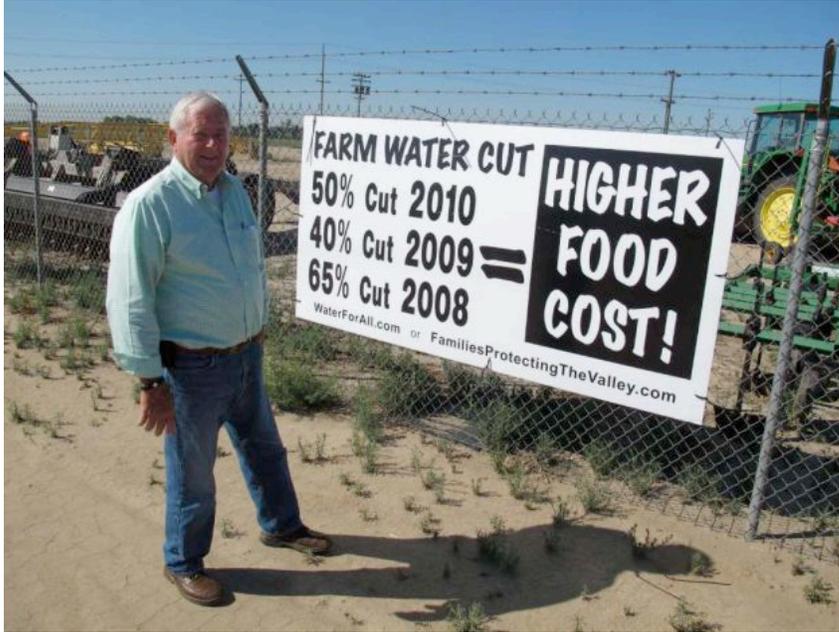
But in a year of heavy rains and a formidable Sierra snowpack, with California's three-year drought officially over and most farmers getting all their contracted irrigation water, the signs strike some as odd.

"I just drove on the highway and those signs have a backdrop of green fields, green grasses," said Jim Metropulos, an advocate at Sierra Club California. "I said wow, these fields seem to be planted with a commodity crop, farmers seem to be irrigating. Where is the drought?"

The signs protest federal environmental regulations that farmers say have limited their access to water to protect smelt and salmon. Environmentalists say they create a misperception of drought and its causes.

"What we've got is a huge public relations campaign to create the impression of a Congress-created dustbowl that doesn't exist," said Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance.

On Highway 99, a few miles north of Chowchilla in the small community of Le Grand, Joe Marchini has just put up several signs on the edge of his wheat and tomato fields. "Farm Water Cut (equals) Higher Food Cost!" says one tacked to a fence by the buzzing highway.



Marchini, who has been farming for 50 years, had to idle some land during the drought, and he said other farmers lost their land.

"I've never had to fight for water like I had in the past five years," Marchini said. "They starved us for water. The signs are very valid, because people forget and you have to keep reminding them what farmers went through."

His signs were paid for by Families Protecting the Valley, a farmer organization that advocates for water for agriculture.

"Our goal is to educate people," said Russ Waymire, a pistachio industry consultant and board member with the group. "We have a water problem here and we need to work together to solve it."

This year's relative abundance of water aside, Waymire said the signs focus on what he believes is the bigger picture: Restrictions meant to save threatened fish unfairly target farmers.

"Sewage discharges are killing the fish and yet they have been

able to blame our pumps and they have been shutting them off," he said.

But even Waymire and Marchini concede the messages may be confusing. The signs list draconian cuts to farmers' water supply: 65 percent in 2008, 60 percent in 2009 and 50 percent last year. Those figures refer to cuts by a state water project that pumps water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta for farmers and cities. Other signs refer to cuts by a federal water project.

But less than a quarter of the reductions in supply were due to endangered species protections, according to a Congressional Research Service report. Most were because of the drought.

The signs also don't explain that water cuts affect some farmers more severely because of the way their contracts are written. Farmers with the newest contracts are the first to face cutbacks, said Pete Lucero, spokesman for the agency that runs the federal water project. That's why farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley — those most vocal about water cuts — received the least water during the drought.

Lucero also said farmers seldom get their full allotments of water because all the contracts add up to more water than exists, even in years without drought. That's because the water projects were developed when California had fewer people and the infrastructure was never completed.

Waymire said that's not the fault of farmers, who are paying for a system the government didn't finish. He also said it hurts all Californians because less water leads to higher farm unemployment, smaller sales tax collections, increased food costs and the possible demise of the state's agriculture.

A study released this month by the Pacific Institute, a nonpartisan research organization based in Oakland, found that

wasn't necessarily the case. The state's farms saw their highest gross revenue on record in 2008, the second year of the drought, with their third highest in 2009. And, while unemployment increased in the Central Valley during the drought, job losses were concentrated in areas other than agriculture, it said.

But the report also found the effect wasn't even, and some counties saw farm income plummet.

That's why Waymire and Marchini plan to continue putting up signs.

"My greatest fear is running out of water," Marchini said. "Water is key; without it, you can't do anything."



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