

Dave Phippen: Almond grower weary of farmers being called water-wasters

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By Dave Phippen



A nut sweeper gathers almonds into rows in Ripon. According to Dave Phippen of the Almond Board of California, today's almond growers produce three times as many almonds with a gallon of water as farmers a generation ago. BART AH YOU — The Modesto Bee | [Buy Photo](#)

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Imagine my surprise to wake up to yet another Sunday morning story in The Modesto Bee ("Rush to drill is uneven" Page A1, June 29) to learn how those pesky nut farmers have caused even more rural Stanislaus residents to experience the unpleasant experience of a dry well.

Having lived in the country my entire life, I'm no stranger to that helpless feeling when the tap yields no water. In the drought of '77 our family experienced both dry domestic and irrigation wells. We were able to secure loans to drill new wells for both purposes. We realized that with the benefit of living in the country comes the responsibility of providing and maintaining our own water supply. I've fixed, cleaned, modified and replaced many domestic



wells for houses on my ranches over my lifetime – it's a fact of life when you live in the country.

It was revealing to learn that John Mendosa's well, though drilled in 1980, was only drilled to a depth of 45 feet. By today's standards, this is a very shallow well. Many domestic wells are now drilled to 150 feet or more. Is it reasonable to expect such shallow wells to produce reliable drinking water at any time, and particularly during a three-year drought?

While the operation of nearby agricultural wells doubtlessly have had some impact, is it fair to blame just the farmers? The drought seems to be the most relevant cause for shallow wells going dry. Also, the Stanislaus County population has nearly doubled from what it was 34 years ago. That certainly has an impact on the aquifer we all share. I also wonder why it will take the well driller so long to replace Mendosa's well; I know a rural resident in Oakdale whose shallow domestic well went dry Saturday and had a new one drilled Monday.

Being a third-generation almond grower, my skin is becoming just a little thin learning that almond growers are to blame every Sunday morning for our lack of surface and groundwater supplies. And even more surprised that Mendosa suggests the Almond Board should fund his new well.

The Almond Board's USDA grower-supported funds are not allowed to fund new wells for rural residents (per USDA rules), but I can share just what we do fund at the Almond Board. Over the past 30 to 50 years, we have spent millions on research projects that help almond growers use water more efficiently, along with other natural resources. Today's almond grower produces three times as many almonds with a gallon of water as our fathers did a generation ago. Eighty percent of all growers use highly efficient pressurized water systems that yield applied water efficiency in the 90th percentile. And those same growers use specialized monitoring stations that tell them when, how much and to what depth to irrigate their orchards. This research has also taught us when our trees do *not* need water.

We will not stop with the present research proposals; we will continue to invest and learn how to do more with less water, and these results benefit all California residents.

But almond growers are a small group. What are the other 99 percent of Californians doing to help with the increasing demands of a growing state population with declining water sources? Have you supported the planning, funding and building of additional water-storage projects for our future residents? Northern California has done little in this regard since the 1970s.

We need additional water storage, not just for domestic needs, but to feed a growing population. We need to consider very difficult choices to offer a balance of environmental and basic human needs. It's well and good to save rivers for wild and scenic status, but do we still consider the multiple uses of hydroelectric dams, which yield not only additional water supplies, but recreation, new lake fisheries, clean energy and flood control? Remember, Dry Creek flooded Modesto as recently as 1997.

California's farmers and ranchers wake up each morning to face the challenge of producing more nutritious food with less water. Will you help them?

Phippen, a Ripon resident, is an almond grower and member of the board of directors for the Almond Board of California.