

Our View: Farmers don't need help deciding what to plant

Farms are not exaggerated lawns. Corn, melons and almonds have more value than, say, geraniums.

We found the suggestion in the [column that accompanies this editorial](#), uh, perplexing. It could only have been written by someone with virtually no knowledge of actual farming, at least in our part of California.

Los Angeles Times columnist George Skelton, one of Sacramento's foremost observers, suggests the state (or someone) should tell farmers what they can plant. Crops that require more water would be forbidden during a drought. Less-thirsty crops would be OK – assuming there was enough water to also keep lawns in Long Beach green.

Obviously, his column is a reaction to our terrible drought. Urbanites are being told that rationing is looming. Skelton, like many city dwellers, appears to resent the fact that so much water goes into growing food. He puts the number at 80 percent, but admits that some people say it is 40 percent (closer to the truth).

Skelton fails to grasp a few basic facts. First, farmers in irrigation districts (such as those around here) get a certain amount of water per acre each year, fluctuating with supplies. Most years, and for most farmers, that supply is sufficient.

Further, like many, he is unfairly villainizing almonds. While it's true an almond orchard generally requires 36 to 40 inches, it's not the most water-dependent crop.

Consider corn, which requires only 24 to 30 inches. But most farmers grow two crops per year on the same land, meaning they use 48 to 60 inches.

"You will regulate farming out of business," said Stanislaus Farm Bureau executive director Wayne Zipser. "You have to have the ability to change crops when the markets require it."

Such decisions already are obvious to most farmers, dictated by water availability. Since the groundwater law passed last year will require counties to regulate pumping, well permits will likely become harder to obtain. Farmers who ignore such signals will go broke soon enough.

Besides, how would the state tell farmers what they could or could not plant? Would they need permits? Would a California Environmental Quality Act process be required to justify business choices?

Farming is not gardening. Farmers take risks in deciding what to plant. During droughts, those risks can be enormous. Farmers are willing to take them, and don't need the help of others to determine what they can and can't plant.