

EDITORIAL: Farmers don't need the state telling them what to plant



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Farms are not exaggerated lawns. Almonds, grapes and tomatoes have more value than, say, geraniums.

We found the suggestion in a column published March 25 in The Bee perplexing. It could only have been written by someone with virtually no knowledge of 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 also was enough water for Southern California lawns.

Obviously, his column is a reaction to our drought. Skelton, like many city dwellers, appears to resent the fact that so much water goes into growing food and fiber. He puts the number at 80%, but admits that some people say it is 40%.

The U.S. Geological Survey pegs it at 61%.

Skelton fails to grasp a few basic facts. First, farmers in irrigation districts 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 demonizing almonds. While it's true an almond orchard generally requires 36 to 40 inches, it's not the most water-dependent crop.

Farmers must have the flexibility to choose their crops and react to changing markets. The price they can get for a particular crop and the cost of water are big factors in the decision-making process.

Such choices 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?

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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.

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