

Opinion: Jerry Brown now a champion for farmers

By Dan Walters

dwalters@sacbee.com

It was somewhat incongruous to watch Gov. Jerry Brown defend California's farmers and their water use on national television Sunday.

In imposing mandatory cutbacks on water use last week, the governor had exempted farmers, generating sharp criticism, especially from Brown's usual allies in the environmental movement.

Under pointed questioning by ABC's Martha Raddatz, Brown said farmers had already seen sharp cutbacks in federal water due to the drought and "fallowed hundreds of thousands of acres of land."

"They're pulling up vines and trees," he continued. "Farmworkers at the very low end of the economic scale here are out of work."

Related

Pressed by Raddatz about farmers' 80 percent share of California's human water use, while generating only about 2 percent of the state's economic output, Brown replied: "Yeah, you bet it's true. But by the way, they're not watering their lawn or taking longer showers. They're providing most of the fruits and vegetables of America."

What made Brown's stout defense of California farmers a little odd is that, as the old saying goes, they have history – mostly of conflict.

During his first stint as governor that began four decades ago, Brown repeatedly clashed with the nation's biggest agricultural industry, first over farm labor policies and later over his initial refusal to use pesticides against an invasion of Mediterranean fruit flies and his plan to transport water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta via a canal.

Farmers accused Brown of reneging on a promise to establish an evenhanded system for overseeing farm labor relations by tilting toward the United Farm Workers union. And his Peripheral Canal project so alienated big San Joaquin Valley farmers that they formed an odd-bedfellows alliance with environmentalists to persuade voters to reject it in 1982.

The farm labor conflict still reverberates during Brown's second gubernatorial reign. He signed one bill to make it easier for field workers to be unionized, and vetoed another. But one big farming operation accuses his Agricultural Labor Relations Board of trying to compel it to accept the UFW by refusing to count ballots in a representation election.

San Joaquin Valley farmers support the latest version of the Peripheral Canal, which involves underground tunnels, but Delta farmers are bitterly opposed.

Brown, meanwhile, has aged (he turns 77 Tuesday) and undergone a personal transformation.

He was something of a Hollywood hipster in the 1970s, but these days he stresses his links to pioneer farmers in the upper Sacramento Valley, often visits relatives in that area, plays host to family gatherings, and talks about building a cabin on ancestral lands.

He's not exactly Farmer Brown, but one might assume that those recent experiences have sensitized him to the challenges of rural life.

Call The Bee's Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, sacbee.com/dan-walters. Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee.