

# Uprooting some farming myths

By Tim Buzby Special to The Bee

As California descends further into its worst drought in recorded history, residents of the Golden State are looking for someone to blame. Many city dwellers have pointed fingers at the state's farmers and ranchers.

But they're blaming the victims. As Gov. Jerry Brown put it, "agricultural water users ... have borne much of the brunt of the drought to date, with ... significantly reduced water allocations and thousands of farmworkers laid off."

Tim Buzby

This misconception is only the latest in a long history of myths about American agriculture. It's time to plow under these myths and plant some seeds of truth about our nation's farmers.

**Myth: Big corporations have taken over the industry**

The idea that most farms are run by big business is a head-scratcher. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that [97 percent of the 2.1 million farms](#) in operation in the United States are family-owned. Fully 88 percent are small, family farms. In Southern states, the share of small family farms is above 90 percent. In Tennessee and West Virginia, it's more than 95 percent.

**Myth: All farmers are rich**

Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that farm households make roughly the same income as the median American household. But that money mostly comes from off-farm sources, such as a second job, Social Security, investment income and the like. The USDA reports that 70 percent of farm families have a second job. Clearly, these farmers are farming because they like the work, not because it's fattening their bank accounts.

**Myth: Farmers don't care about the environment**

No other industry on the planet depends more on a clean, sustainable environment than farming.

Farmers are producing more with less. According to the [American Farm Bureau Federation](#), farmers produce 262 percent more food with 2 percent fewer inputs – such as energy, seeds, fertilizer and feed – compared with 1950. That means less energy use, less pollution and less waste.

Farmers also have cut back drastically on their use of chemicals. Between 1980 and 2007, the use of pesticides on farms [dropped 20 percent](#) as the science of pest management improved.

**Myth: Food costs too much**

By any measure, food is less expensive in America than ever before, thanks largely to the incredible increase in farm productivity over the years. As a result, American families spend a smaller share of their income on food – just 6.7 percent – than families in any other country in the world. In Canada, families devote less than 10 percent of their income to food. In France and Japan, it's about 14 percent. And in India, it's a staggering 36 percent.



Myth: Farming is in decline

Even though farming represents a small share of the job market, the farming industry remains a significant share of the economy. Agriculture and agriculture-related industries accounted for \$776 billion in GDP in 2012, according to the USDA. Furthermore, farm productivity has nearly doubled since 1980. This increased productivity has helped close the trade deficit, as the United States' \$115 billion worth of agricultural exports outstrip its agricultural imports.

This economic strength is particularly important in America's rural communities, where poverty levels are at their highest since 1986. There, farming has been a crucial job creator, providing steady employment during the recession and creating new jobs in the years since.

U.S. agriculture is only going to grow. By 2023, agriculture exports are projected to be \$172 billion, a roughly 25 percent increase from last year's numbers.

That's a future we can all benefit from. But to get there, farmers and ranchers need a little support in their home states and in Congress. And that support starts with a better understanding of who these Americans really are.

Today's farmers are producing more with less, making food more affordable, helping to protect the environment and providing crucial jobs for rural communities. And they're doing it out of a love of farming.

That's a good story to tell. And it's one that happens to be true.

Tim Buzby is the president and CEO of Farmer Mac, Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation.