

Paul Wenger: Drought has unprecedented effects on agriculture and our community

By Paul Wenger

As California weathers a fourth year of drought, we should reflect on how we got here and how this drought has had more impact than earlier ones.

Modesto's I Street arch says it best: "Water, Wealth, Contentment, Health." The pioneers who laid the foundation for our area knew water would be the determining factor in the success of agriculture. It was that success that led to the expansion of our population and new industries and businesses that followed, many directly supporting or depending on the production from our farms and ranches.

The grandchildren of those early pioneers coined the phrase "where the land owns the water and the power," because it was the farmers who paid the initial costs of building Don Pedro Dam, in conjunction with the city of San Francisco.

Many want to rewrite history or redefine how our unique reservoir and irrigation system was developed. Some claim it was those who pay for electricity generated from the reservoir who were on the hook for construction costs. I imagine those same folks would argue the patrons of a restaurant would own the eating establishment because its owner used their dollars to pay off the debt incurred to build it. The fact that the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts *are* irrigation districts – operating under the California Irrigation Code – benefits everyone in their service areas.

The Modesto and Turlock areas suffered through a more intense drought in 1976-77, and a longer drought in 1988-93, without the restrictions we are now experiencing. There was significantly less water in Don Pedro in 1993 after five years of drought than in 2015 after four dry years, yet farmers were allotted more water for crops. Environmental restrictions and regulations have confounded our ability to use the water we have stored. Governmental agencies have taken water from our reservoir without paying 1 cent for it.

We often hear the mantra "user should pay." Well, we paid for the water resources we depend on, yet governmental fiat continues to chip away at our ability to use it.

Our entire region is now at risk from continued restrictions on our water system. Modesto residents benefit from water stored behind Don Pedro Dam by not being solely dependent on groundwater. Farmers have benefited from having a reliable supply of water, reflected in the value of the land. Our sandy-loam soils have been efficient producers of many crops, while also allowing for the recharge of our underground aquifer via flood irrigation.

We are fortunate to have relatively strong groundwater resources that directly correlate to our once-abundant surface water supplies. However, it could be put in jeopardy with increased reliance on groundwater and less recharge from flood irrigation. Storing money in a savings account in a bank isn't wasteful, and storing water underground isn't wasteful, either.

Stanislaus County, and the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts in particular, are blessed with some of the best soils found anywhere in the world, made all the more productive because of our world-class water storage and delivery system. As the global marketplace becomes stronger, a burgeoning middle class will be hungry for California-grown foods. People around the world have more money to spend on high-quality California-grown food products because of our nation's appetite for imported consumer goods.

Every consumer product has a water footprint, many much greater than food. People can survive without another

gadget, but not without water to drink and food to eat. Water scarcity is not just a California issue; other countries are facing even more dire water scarcity.

We must honor and protect the sacrifices and investments made by those who laid the foundation for our region, investments from which we have prospered. If not, future generations will look upon those of us who could have made a difference as a failed generation, too immersed in our own desires. And the Modesto Arch will become tarnished, rusty and an embarrassing acknowledgment of opportunity wasted.

Wenger is a Modesto farmer and president of the California Farm Bureau.