

Paul Betancourt: My farm, my family and the drought

By Paul Betancourt Special to The Bee

The roots of our family's farm go back more than a hundred years. My wife Sheryl's great grandfather came over from Switzerland in 1880. After working as a hired hand in different places around California, he and his family settled in Kerman in 1912.

Sheryl's grandfather farmed 50 acres of cotton and hay. Today we farm 765 acres.

This year's crop includes Pima cotton, wheat, almonds, cantaloupes and onions.

The most common question I get is some variation of, "How are you doing with the drought?" I usually make some crack about, "No water? No problems." But, it is a problem.

Last year we had to put \$40,000 into fixing wells and installed a \$112,000 drip system in our orchard. This year we put another \$35,000 into fixing a well. Some day I would like to be out of debt. I hear that is nice.

In addition to those costs, each year I have had to pay more than \$40,000 in taxes to support the water district bureaucracy that gives me no water.

Last year the state passed groundwater regulations. They cut off the surface water then find out, "You have a groundwater problem." I want to jump up and down and yell, "That is why we put the surface water systems in years ago."

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My point is not to pick a fight over last year's groundwater bill. My point is that groundwater is our reserve system. As a farmer we have the wells as a back-up system. The first five years I farmed we never turned the wells on. Then we used them during the 1986-93 drought. Then we turned them off.

Surface water is higher-quality water.

In addition to the quantity issue, surface water is higher quality than ground water. Groundwater has more salt than the surface water. I cannot tell you how much we would rather not use the wells. They are only for emergency backup.

Drip systems are precise, but they are not simple. They take a lot of management. Instead of having someone in the field once every week or two when we would irrigate the old-fashioned way. We have to have someone in the field every day checking lines. If the lines are above ground coyotes can chew on them. If they are underground they can pop apart.

We had all our wells tested last winter. If we are going to have problems I would rather have problems in January than July. We cannot test the well Grandpa put in 70 years ago because of the condition of the well casing. So I am on pins and needles about that one.

The others are fine. In fact, one well has come up 60 feet in the last five years. That was a surprise. The only explanation that makes sense is that so much ground has been fallowed that it has allowed the aquifer to re-charge.

This does confirm the idea behind last year's groundwater legislation that there might be a sustainable level of

groundwater use. Of course, I will be on pins and needles about that, too.

Infrastructure

When I started farming 34 years ago, there were two welding shops within 10 minutes of our ranch. The first one closed down a few years ago. The second one closed last month. There isn't enough business to keep them open. It may not mean much to you and it isn't the end of the world for me. But, it is an indicator that the vendors and suppliers I rely on are slowly fading away.

How the drought affects my future

We are looking at how to change our crop mix. I have grown Pima cotton and wheat in rotation. It is a great rotation. I can water wheat in the winter and cotton in the summer. Rotating with wheat has increased my yields over half a bale per acre. But, wheat is probably not the best bang for the gallon of water.

We are growing onions for the first time this year. But, there are two problems with fresh market produce. The markets are volatile and they use water in the summer. My wells have only so much capacity. I could not replace my wheat with vegetables without some surface water to use at the peak of summer. It is a complicated equation.

Without a reliable water supply, how can I make decisions about the future? Why should I invest in a drip system that costs over a thousand dollars an acre if I will not have water to run through the drip system? Why should I invest in a new well for the dry years, if the state will not let me turn it on?

I have to make decisions now that will take years to implement. The wrong decision now and I could be hung out to dry.

So, how are we doing during this drought? We did OK last year. This year looks OK, so far. Next year?

Paul Betancourt of Kerman is a farmer and a past president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau.