

City folk ask: Don't farmers and environment use more water?

By Mark Grossi
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The San Joaquin Valley's drought fight has spread this year from farm fields to cities, as [Bee reporter Marc Benjamin](#) and I reported over the weekend. Now readers are asking me to compare city water use with agriculture and environmental use.

Here's how California's water use breaks down: It's 50.2% for environment, 40.9% for agriculture and 8.9% for urban residents and businesses, according to the state [Department of Water Resources](#).

The next question readers ask is important, since many cities are struggling with state-ordered water cutbacks of up to 36 percent. The answer from the state has not satisfied many readers.

The question: Why is anyone in city limits sweating this at all?

One reader wrote: "Residential landscape water usage is so small on a state level, it has little impact."

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State leaders have responded consistently that cities must do their part to conserve, especially in this drought crisis. Gov. Jerry Brown ordered a 25 percent reduction across the board for California cities, and nobody is exempt, they say.

Max Gomberg, climate and conservation manager with the [State Water Resources Board](#), says it's not up for debate.

"We heard the unfairness claims being made in Southern California earlier this summer," he says. "But it is hard to overstate the severity of this drought. This is an acute emergency."

There's much more to the story. Pull on that one thread and you unravel the weaknesses of California's water world. Here are a few of them, but this is by no means a full list:

- Farmers were not asked to conserve 25 percent of their water use, as California cities were. But with several million acres in the San Joaquin Valley, farmers are getting little or no river water – for the second year in a row.
- To save crops, farmers are pumping groundwater. Now [several Valley places are subsiding or sinking faster](#) than scientists have ever seen. There might be millions of dollars in damage to canals, small dams, roads and buildings.
- [Thousands of rural residents have lost their private wells](#), which have dried up largely because of desperate groundwater pumping to save farming. People are living here without indoor plumbing.
- Should there be groundwater rules that stop unsustainable practices, such as expanding farm acreage, based on more groundwater pumping? [A law was passed](#) last year to help address that issue, but it won't be fully in place for many years.
- The environment is getting hammered in the drought, too. A big part of environmental water use is river flow in Northern California, where many fish species are imperiled. Flows have been reduced for rivers and in wetland habitats on wildlife refuges.

- [Animals are dying in wildfires](#). The air around foothill communities is congested with smoke particles as wildfires, such as the Rough fire southeast of Fresno, burn through forests that have been left too dry by years of below-average rain and snow.

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Back to the cities. After California's cities missed the state's 20% voluntary conservation goal in 2014, authorities decided on the mandatory 25% target this year.

It all has happened so fast. Many in The Bee story pointed out how rigid and unfair the order seems for many inland cities, which face more heat and higher water needs.

Summer of 2015 in the water world has been ugly and contentious. We are left with a lot of unanswered questions for state and local leaders. Expect a lot more ugly and contentious next year if winter storms stay away again.

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