

Last night, *60 Minutes* had a long story on [the California water crisis](#), featuring Lesley Stahl interviewing (among others) [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) and UC Davis professor [Jeff Mount](#). On the positive side, the story accurately portrayed the vulnerability of California's fragile through-Delta water delivery system to a major earthquake or catastrophic levee break. But CBS News flubbed the overall storyline.

In typical media fashion, it oversimplified the story to "Delta smelt versus farmers," with barely a mention of the two-year closure of the coastal salmon fishery or the crash of the Bay-Delta ecosystem as a whole. Worse, *60 Minutes* swallowed whole a tall tale concocted by anti-regulatory interests: that protecting the Delta smelt has economically crippled California agriculture.

That story is demonstrably false on at least two different levels. First, while the San Joaquin valley has had a tough economic year, its woes have not been driven by water shortages. According to [this independent report](#) from economist Jeffrey Michael at the University of the Pacific, the real culprit is the collapse of the housing market and therefore of the construction industry:

Reductions in water deliveries due to environmental regulations have increased the Valley unemployment rate by 0.1 percentage point, and the drought 0.2 percentage points for a total water shortage impact of a 0.3 percentage point increase in the unemployment rate. The construction collapse has increased unemployment by at least 2.5 percentage points, and is only one component of the foreclosure and housing crisis that continues to drive the majority of job loss in the San Joaquin Valley.

Indeed, state and federal water suppliers have bent over backwards to give farmers water even as the Bay-Delta ecosystem collapsed. As the graph below shows, average water exports from the Delta increased in recent years (before falling a bit in 2008 and 2009), while Delta smelt and Chinook salmon production were crashing.



From: NRDC, *Fish Out of Water: How Water Management in the Bay-Delta Threatens the Future of California's Salmon Fishery* (July 2008), p. 16

Second, it's not true that California agriculture had a bad year across the board. Farming has always been a boom-bust business, as overplanting gluts the market and tough growing conditions deplete it. But 2009 was not a bust year. The California tomato crop, for example,

[hit an all-time high](#) both in total production and in dollar value at the farm. As for the almond grower that complained to *60 Minutes* that he was having to destroy his trees, take that with a grain of salt. Almond trees have a relatively short life-span, so orchards are continually removed and replanted. California almond production was down about 20% in 2009 compared to 2008, but not due to any irrigation restrictions. The fall was due to a combination of [late frost, a wet spring during pollination season](#) and [heavy bearing last year](#). Almonds remain a boom crop, to the point that the big concern for almond growers is boosting demand, not increasing production.

So yes, California has a water problem. But no, it's not a problem caused by the Delta smelt or by environmentalists. Nor is it a problem that's destroying the California economy or even the California farm economy. Shame on *60 Minutes* for perpetuating myths that only get in the way of addressing the real problem.

