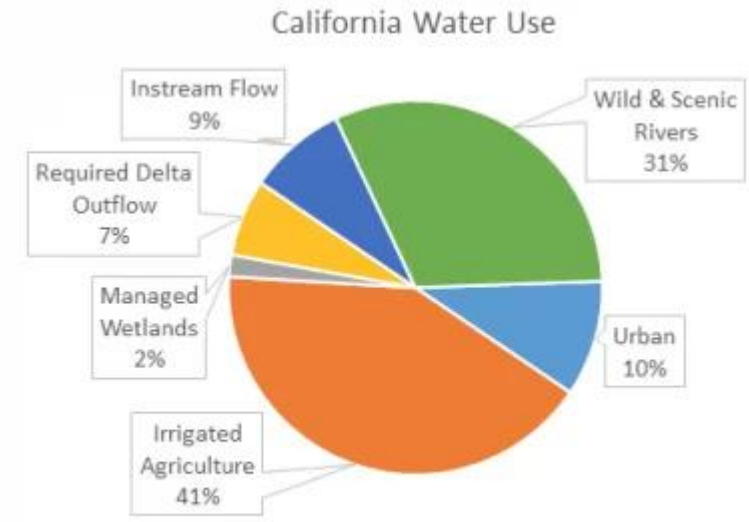

What Is Agricultural Use?

We all know the story, and the percentages: of water used by human beings in California (i.e. not going to environmental uses), agriculture uses a whopping 80%. So it makes little sense to call on urban users to conserve, so the story goes, until ag goes first. Certainly nonprofits like Food and Water Watch think so:

As drought and climate change continue to wreak havoc on California's water supply, an environmental advocacy group is calling on the state to limit the cultivation of thirsty crops like almonds and alfalfa, saying the agriculture industry is guzzling most of the state's supplies at the expense of residents.

But just think about this a moment. It really overstates the issue.



Take alfalfa – please

Take alfalfa – please. In one sense, it’s completely true: why in the world are we using valuable water on thirsty alfalfa, only to have it shipped to China as cattle feed (and Saudi Arabia, ditto), and then shipped back here for hamburger? It should be grown somewhere better watered.

All true, and all fair. In the words of Marisa Tomei, how-EVAH:

Who actually is eating all that hamburger? Probably people in the most heavily populated areas of this state and other states, namely: people in cities and suburbs. Put another way, aren’t the “users” of the water also the people who consume the end-product of what the water goes for? Isn’t it a little ridiculous for people like me to munch on almonds and then trash the farmers that grow them? (I don’t worry as much about alfalfa because I don’t eat beef, but you get the idea).

Now, it isn’t necessarily the case that alfalfa wouldn’t be produced as cheaply if we stopped using, say, the Colorado River, to grow it in the Imperial Valley. Maybe once that spigot was turned off, alfalfa would be grown somewhere better watered, so in fact it would make more sense to grow it there (wherever that might be). Fair enough, and I would support that.


Alfalfa: Dinner Is Served

But one reason why alfalfa (and rice etc.) are being grown in California is because they get the water, and that allows them to produce it more cheaply than growing it somewhere better watered. It might make more sense in terms of the use of water *generally* to stop growing it in the Imperial Valley, and one could say that really, the price of alfalfa-fed hamburger is really being subsidized by unsustainably cheap water. I think that that is plausible, and probably true.

But once again, who is eating that hamburger? Not the alfalfa farmers. City and suburban people are. And it obscures the issue by dismissing it as an “agricultural” use. If you eat hamburger, ***you*** are “using” that water. If you want to use less of it, then you should pay more for your hamburger.

It’s all very well and good to condemn ag for wasteful water use, and I do. But we need to be clear, at least to ourselves, what that means.

In the end, there is no free lunch. Whether you eat almonds or hamburger or anything else.