**California’s Drought — Who’s Really Using all the Water?**

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Governor Jerry Brown has declared a drought emergency for the state of California. 2013 was the driest year in the state’s history – since records started being kept about 100 years ago. State water reservoirs are critically low and farmers, lawmakers, and environmentalists’ growing concerns have gone from a slow drip to a raging storm. Activists and farmers recently joined forces and came in droves from the Central Valley to rally on the capitol steps in Sacramento, demanding action as water levels drop and anxiety levels rise.

California residents have been asked to be vigilant and cut back on household water use, but only about 4 percent of California’s water footprint is individual, personal use. A stunning 80 percent goes to agriculture, according to a recent report from the NRDC and Pacific Institute, so if we really want to talk about drastic conservation, perhaps we should look at our food choices.

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Of the foods produced in the Golden State, the thirstiest by far are those that are derived from animals. Household impact is a trickle compared to the flood of water needed to produce meat, dairy, and eggs, especially when compared to plant foods. For example, a study at Cornell University found that producing one pound of animal protein requires about 100 times more water than producing one pound of grain protein. Another study adds to the overflow of evidence finding that the amount of water needed to produce one pound of beef is almost 1,600 gallons, compared to just 102 gallons for a pound of wheat.

Humans drink less than one gallon of water per day, but a cow can drink up to 23 gallons of water a day, according to a North Dakota State University study. That’s a huge amount of water to keep millions of animals alive.

**Hidden Water Wasted in Livestock Production**

Not only does it take vast amounts of water to hydrate the animals, millions of additional gallons of fresh water go to irrigate the feed for livestock, to wash excrement off the concrete floors, to clean the blood and grease from the equipment in the butchering process, and further uses that are not necessary in plant food production. For example, a dairy operation that utilizes an automatic flushing system can use up to 150 gallons of water per cow, per day, the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Services reports.

The crops we have chosen to quickly fatten up our farm animals are wasting water as well. Corn and soybeans, which represent the vast majority of livestock’s diet, are comparably cheap as a result of government subsidies. However, these crops are also exogenous; they have a deeper thirst for water than endogenous crops, which are dormant in the warm summer months when there is a high demand for water. Exogenous crops like corn and soy require more water and are therefore yet another drain on an already wasteful system of processing animal products, as a study published in Water Policy reveals.

Most people shower every day an average of about seven minutes of hot water with the showerhead flowing out about two gallons of water a minute. The Water Education Foundation calculates that every pound of California beef requires about 2,464 gallons of water to produce. You would save more water just by replacing a pound of beef with plant foods than you would by not showering for six months!

People are looking to grass-fed beef as a possible eco-alternative to commercial operations, but the grass is no greener for grass-fed animals. In fact, pasture raised animals require more water than their factory farmed cousins, because they have a higher activity level and spend more time in the sun, especially during the summer months. Grass-fed beef can also produce 50 to 60 percent more greenhouse gas emissions than their grain-eating counterparts, sometimes producing as much as four times more methane emissions than feedlot cattle, reports Science News.

# Works Cited

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