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WATER IS LIFE
Marc Reisner with Leo LaPorte
(KNBR - 680 AM)

. . . coming back. I said it was dead because we voted it down. If we vote it down it will come back. If we vote it down again it will come back again. But they need water somehow. I'm not quite sure how to get it to them. But L.A. is not the problem statewide because they use relatively little water compared to state consumption as a whole. Now, metropolitan L.A. - which is around 14, 15 million people, counting San Diego - uses about 10% of the state's water. Farmers use about 85%. If you want to get at California water consumption and waste you have to look at farmers. Its a battle between urban consumption and agricultural consumption. I think the North-South battle is about dead, except that I think L.A. is going to come up here for more water if they can - although, over our dead bodies.

Let's Stop Agricultural Water Waste:

But what I've been saying is the natural alliance is for the urban areas of the state to try to make the farmers more efficient. And that could mean that they stop growing dumb crops like rice which really shouldn't be grown in the desert. Certainly not 400,000 acres of rice - actual flooding. If you go into the Sacramento Valley right now you'll see a lake, bigger than Tahoe in surface area. And its all rice. It's evaporating in 105 degree heat. The reason that rice is being grown is that the water is subsidized. They buy that water for a buck and a half an acre-foot. Urban people in Santa Barbara pay \$700 for the same amount of water.

The Federal government provides that subsidy. The Bureau of Reclamation. Your taxes. Its because when they tried to get farming going in the West it was so difficult. It was such a hostile region. The government decided that the only way they were going to get these guys out here and have them make a stake in farming was to subsidize the price of water. So, in essence, that was what we did. And now we do it with people like Boswell, the biggest cotton grower in the world. The big guys can muscle in on the subsidy programs and take it over. It's an old story. When you look at price supports in other agricultural areas, these are sacred cows. Compared to what Defense contractors get, in the way of gifts and give-aways it probably doesn't amount to that much. But the problem is that as long as the water is that cheap, it gets wasted. It's not a question of money. It's a question of water. You're going to see a push for more dams unless you get rid of the waste. There's plenty of water, already developed, conserved by reservoirs in California for any rational need for the next fifty years. There's enough water for 400 million people. If we want that many. There's enough water for fifty million people and a lot of agriculture. But there's not enough for the kind of waste that we're seeing today. Mainly in the agricultural sector. Now the cities are going to have to cut

The Issue of Marginal Agriculture:

We've got, first of all, to face the fact that this is a desert. Fundamentally a desert. A semi-desert with a desert heart as one famous historian called it. And we've got to stop doing crazy things like growing crops that need eight feet of water in a place where it rains 10". A lot of those lands that produce selenium that comes into the Bay, the Westlands there, they never should have been brought into production. And they never would have been if it hadn't been for the Federal government. It's such lousy soil. The problems that are caused by that land are much more expensive than the value of the cotton they grow on it - which is subsidized anyway.

We've done some crazy things out here. The problem is that we have this religion about making the desert bloom. We've always had it. And a lot of urban people are really ignorant about how much water agriculture uses. Everybody up here loves to hate L.A. "It's all L.A.'s fault. It's all the swimming pools in L.A." But there's one single cotton farmer in the San Joaquin valley that uses as much water as all of metropolitan San Diego. One guy.

Here are some statistics: Ten percent of the water used in California goes to cities, eighty-five percent goes to agriculture. Fifteen percent goes to cities and industry. All non-agricultural use. Of the urban areas, roughly half is used down there in L.A.

So, obviously we've got a political battle on our hands. I don't know if the Peripheral Canal is a possibility. There'll be a big fight over it as we had in '82.

I don't think we're going to get rid of agriculture in California; and we shouldn't. That's a major industry.

So what should we be doing? Cities looking for water, instead of looking at new dams, we should be looking at marginal agriculture. Land that has problems, selenium problems. Looking at low value crops like pasture and rice.

Let's look at this statistically. Pasture, irrigated pasture, used more water last year, or a normal year, than all urban citizens in the state combined. Just to feed cows. What was it worth? \$94 million. In a \$600 billion economy. We're talking about an industry that used 1/9 of the water in the state being used to support an industry that contributed 1/6000 of the economy. And you wouldn't put a lot of people out of work. You're going to create jobs with that water. If you moved that water to an urban area you'd create much more wealth and more jobs than you would raising cow food. The cows should be grown in Iowa and shipped out here. But we've got subsidized water.