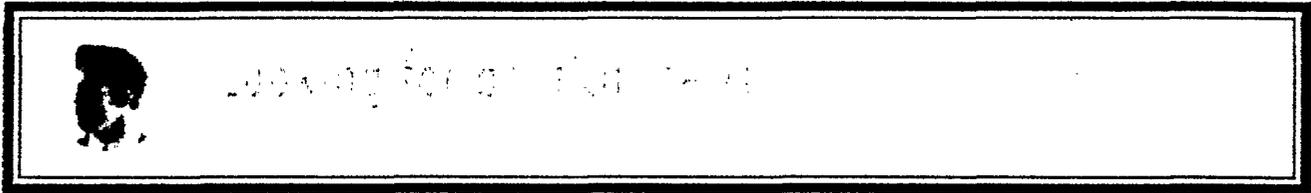


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The Sacramento Bee

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Peter H. King: After a quiet interlude, water wars loom again

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■ PATTERSON -- The tall, lanky farmer stepped onto the porch and stuck out his hand, a strong, farmer's hand. "Art Filice," he said. He looked at the sky. It was raining. He pointed toward an apricot orchard in front of the farmhouse.

"It's over there," he said. "Do you want to see it?"

"Sure, let's see it."

He led the way through the light rain to the edge of the orchard. He pointed at the ground. Black hoses ran in rows between the apricot trees. They were long hoses. They ran between the trees. The apricot trees of Art Filice Jr.

"That's it?"

Yes, he said, "that's it."

Art Filice's drip irrigation system.

In silence we stared at the hoses, trying to think of something appropriate to say. When you get right down to it, drip irrigation will never replace weather or White House sex as a conversation starter. Hemingway never wrote about it. As a journalistic topic, it holds out little promise of Pulitzer Prizes. Still, this was Art Filice's drip irrigation system, and on this day, Tuesday, it was as famous as it ever was going to get. The day before, Filice Farms had provided one of a dozen or so case studies cited in a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the influential environmental organization. The report was intended to illustrate how

drip irrigation, tail water recovery and similar conservation methods, combined with alternative approaches to ground fertilization and pest control, can save water and topsoil and reduce agricultural wastes.

Titled "Agricultural Solutions," it tabulated the heroic amounts of water being saved and soil improved on Central Valley test farms. Testimonials from the farmers themselves were presented. A typical passage: "For John, getting into the business of using compost has made farming fun again. As he says, "Most folks think the soil out here is dead, but I've seen it come alive."

Despite its distinctively down-home tone, the 68-page document was not without political context. While California wasn't watching, the state's fabled water warriors have begun to emerge, restless, from a season of cease-fire. A certain itchiness is now evident among those who favor concrete solutions -- dams, downstream reservoirs, even a reincarnation of the once-defeated Peripheral Canal -- to the state's chronically tight water supplies. Big cities want more water, big agriculture wants more water, and they regard the uncaptured bounty of El Nino now racing to the ocean as squandered lucre.

In this climate, environmentalists have found it necessary to make the case, once again, for alternative ways to stretch water supplies beyond more dams and concrete ditches. There is, for instance, water marketing, which allows price to influence use. And there is conservation -- modest, incremental methods which lack the monumental thump of a colossal dam, but nonetheless can generate significant results. Remember, this is a state that once was warned by utilities and demographers alike that it would go dark unless nuclear plants were strung up and down the coast. Then they discovered high-efficiency light bulbs and double-paned windows....

All of which, of course, is what led the way to Art Filice and his apricot orchard. Make no mistake, this is a bona fide farmer, with a "No Water, No Farms, No Jobs" bumper sticker on his pickup and plenty of concerns about what environmental causes and creeping urbanization might mean for the agrarian brotherhood.

Filice said he had installed his drip system for pragmatic reasons: With water prices rising, the method penciled out better than flood or furrow irrigation. He agreed to cooperate with the NRDC report, not because he's some born-again Rachel Carson, but rather because it held out the promise of "something positive being said" about farmers.

Do you think, he was asked, if this sort of thing is going to be the future for California farmers?

He stared down at the hoses running through his orchard and thought for a moment, while God's own drip system continued to irrigate our heads.

"Well," he said, finally, "I suppose it might come to that someday. I'm

...the farmer was wise to hedge his bet, for the only certainty is that California's future, like its past, will be shaped by water. Beyond that, it's a wide open field. How much water will be used to grow crops, and how much will be put to work growing cities, restoring rivers? Will new supplies be captured behind more concrete or will the state find ways to work with what it already has, to parcel it out, drip by drip, through little black hoses like the ones that run through Art Filice's apricot trees? Questions for the not so rainy days to come.

PETER H. KING'S column will appear regularly in **The Bee**. Write him at P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, 95852, or call (916) 321-1892. e-mail: pkings@mcclatchy.com

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