

'Farmers Are Exploiting Conservation Subsidies To Use More Water, Not Less'

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## Farmers Are Exploiting Conservation Subsidies To Use More Water, Not Less

BY AVIVA SHEN

June 10, 2013 at 2:01 pm



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The government has paid farmers about \$1 billion since 1997 to help them develop more efficient irrigation systems — but the subsidies have backfired. According to the New York Times, water conservation subsidies have actually led farmers to use ~~even more water~~ to irrigate crops, draining already fast-depleting aquifers and reservoirs.



(Credit: Matthew Staver/New York Times)

~~Increasingly severe droughts and record low-rainfall~~ have forced farmers to rely more heavily on groundwater supplies. But without changing current farming practices, these reserves will run out rapidly. Climate change will make droughts longer and hotter, while rain will only come in harsh storms that will flood crops and erode valuable topsoil without much of it making it down to the groundwater.

The conservation subsidy under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was meant to help farmers employ more environmentally friendly practices. However, research shows the program prompted many farmers to expand their acreage using the water that was supposed to be conserved.

Two recent studies discovered that farmers receiving conservation payments in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico used some of their water savings to expand irrigation or grow thirstier crops, effectively defeating the purpose. The new efficient irrigation equipment has actually shrunk groundwater supplies at an even faster pace, researchers found.

Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM) and Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) have pushed responsible water management with bills to require that subsidized irrigation systems keep the conserved water in underground water tables or streams. Water tables have already dropped as much as 150 feet in some areas. Dwindling groundwater supplies coupled with ~~record low rainfalls~~ could transform American farmland into a ~~blighted desert~~ without aggressive water storage policies.

Americans are already wasting dangerously large amounts of water. Water consumption has tripled over the last 50 years, even though the population has not quite doubled in the same time period. The primary culprit is farming irrigation, which accounts for 80 percent of all water use. Most of this water is ~~wasted~~ through mismanagement. Popular ~~sprinkler systems~~, for instance, lose tons of water to evaporation, while irrigation pipes flood plants with far more water than they can handle.

The last time farmers flouted conservation practices, much of American farmland was lost in the ~~Dust Bowl~~, plunging hundreds of thousands of people into poverty.

California and other western states are starting to see the consequences of agricultural excess in the form of ~~shrinking crop yields~~. Some farmers, no longer able to rely on aquifers, are experimenting with risky but more sustainable water-conserving techniques like ~~dry-farming~~.

Farm subsidies have been hotly contested in Congress during the Farm Bill debate, as they tend to benefit the ~~wealthiest farmers~~.

**Tags:** Agriculture conservation Farm Bill Water

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## **4 Responses to Farmers Are Exploiting Conservation Subsidies To Use More Water, Not Less**

by Taboola

1. M Tucker says:

June 10, 2013 at 2:42 pm

“The last time farmers flouted conservation practices, much of American farmland was lost in the

Dust Bowl, plunging hundreds of thousands of people into poverty.”

Don't worry about the farmers. With the help of congressional Republicans farmers can make more money if their crops fail. That is what they get with the new crop insurance in the new farm bill. Eliminate the food stamp program but make sure farmers make a profit even if they engage in bad practices. So we will not see migrations away from the farm as droughts increase. We will see farmers continuing to thrive, at tax payer expense, as the top soil blows away. So the average American pays twice for these bad practices, once at the grocery store as prices rise and again with our tax dollars. Thank you irresponsible farmers and unscrupulous Republicans!

2. Zimzone says:

June 10, 2013 at 3:53 pm

Farmers here in MN are pumping water onto crops like there's no tomorrow.

Come to think of it, perhaps there isn't...

3. Bob Wright says:

June 10, 2013 at 3:56 pm

How much of this pumped water is used to grow corn for gasohol? Is the energy used to irrigate counted in the already negative energy balance?

4. Rabid Doomsayer says:

June 10, 2013 at 6:23 pm

Just how much will you have to pay for that last gallon of clean water?