

Lessons learned from California's recent drought

By Adam Kotin, California Climate & Agriculture Network

One thing can be said for certain about the 2007-2009 drought in California: it sure got a lot of attention. Both its natural severity and the complex set of political, economic, and social disputes yielded a drama of epic proportions that got people talking around the state and across the country.

But now that the dust has settled, the time has come to figure out what it all really meant, and how to prepare for when it happens again. Not surprisingly, the recent drought has enlivened the ages-old debate on water management in the state.

Two reports released in June, one from the Pacific Institute and one from the California Roundtable on Water and Food Supply, offer valuable insights and recommendations on how to reduce vulnerability and increase resiliency in the event of future droughts.

The Pacific Institute's report claims to provide "the most comprehensive and updated information on the impacts of the 2007-2009 drought." The authors crunched volumes of data on water and energy use, employment and poverty, crop insurance indemnities, precipitation, fisheries, and various other economic and political factors to guide their analysis.

Their overall conclusion is that while the drought certainly had some devastating impacts on agriculture, they were neither as severe nor as widespread as had been previously estimated. While the all-time high gross revenue for California farms was reached in the midst of the drought (in 2008), significant revenue declines were seen in some counties. The state's overall harvested acreage, which has diminished annually for

at least decade, actually slowed its decline during the drought. Some growers adopted effective and sustainable coping strategies, while others relied too heavily on groundwater pumping, according to the Pacific Institute.

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