

Editorial: California needs to rethink water rights

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When someone says that there are two Californias, the reference these days is usually to the political differences between coastal and inland residents rather than the historical split between north and south.

But there is a third and even more telling divide in this state, and it has to do with the water wars that create some of our most bitter intra-state rivalries.

While the rest of the nation and the world may imagine that California is all Silicon Valley and Silicon Beach, Sierra Nevada vistas and Hollywood stars, the reality is that we are also America's greengrocer. There is no more fertile place on Earth than our Central Valley.

This comes at a cost for the West's precious water supplies. That's because it comes at very little cost the to state's largest water user by far: agriculture.

Farming accounts for more than 80 percent of the state's water usage, while providing less than 5 percent of its gross domestic product. That economic reality drives wasteful and even unsustainable agricultural practices, like flooding fields for rice cultivation in a state whose urban population constantly is hectored about water conservation.

How can farmers afford to flood? Because inherited 19th-century water rights make their water costs a tiny fraction of what the state's residential and commercial users pay. Sometimes those rates are even use-neutral; farmers pay the same flat rate per year whether they use one drop or a

thousand acre-feet.

Should we therefore stop farming? Of course not. It's just that conservation of this precious resource must come from all Californians.

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