

Opinion: The drought on my dinner plate

By Megan McArdle, Bloomberg

California is suffering an epic drought. It's not the worst drought the state has ever had, but it's certainly the worst drought the state has ever had while housing tens of millions of residents and containing a significant fraction of U.S. agricultural production. And there's some suggestion that this may be the new normal – not just because of global warming, as you've probably already read, but also because California's natural condition is "extra dry." An expert interviewed by Tom Philpott of Mother Jones says that the 20th century, which saw California's rise as an agricultural powerhouse, was an unusually wet period for the state. Merely reverting to "normal" would mean having about 15 percent less water – and the state is still growing.

That does not mean that California will become an uninhabited desert, scattered with wind-scoured ruins providing a silent and reproachful testimony to Man's hubris. California has enough water to support quite a lot of population growth – if it cuts out a lot of that agriculture. It may even be able to support most of the agriculture – if people start leaving. The problem is, it may not be able to manage both unless the rains return or it finds some clever way to reclaim low-cost potable water from the sea.

In a worst-case scenario, my money is on agriculture losing out; its lobbyists are motivated, but they're simply outnumbered by all the city dwellers. So it's worth contemplating what a dramatic scale-back in California's agricultural production would do to California – and the rest of us.

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