

Don Cayo: B.C. consumers may pay the price for helping to drink California dry

The fruit and vegetables we import contribute to that state's deadly drought

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JULY 25, 2014



Given the intensity and duration of California's drought, there's credence to the argument that Canadians are helping to drink California dry

Photograph by: Marcio Jose Sanchez, AP

VANCOUVER — Few things stir Canadian nationalism faster than talk of exporting water across the Canada-U.S. border.

Unless, of course, it's "them" exporting to "us." Then we don't notice — or we take it for granted.

But the net volume of water shipped from their side of the border to ours is immense. It comes in food — lettuce, which is more than 95 per cent water, strawberries at 92 per cent, and much more.

For some products, like meat and grain, two-way cross-border trade is more or less balanced, so the water content of edible imports and exports is more or less equal. For others, like dairy or poultry products, Canada's protectionism ensures there's virtually no trade.

So most of the imbalance is in fruit and vegetables. And most of these U.S. products that we import come from California, despite the state's deadly drought.

California's agriculture industry, the biggest in the U.S. by a country mile, is worth US\$37.5 billion a year. This is nearly four times the value of farm products in B.C., even though our province is well over twice as large.

California exports about 10 per cent of this, most of it to Canada.

The amount of water used to grow and handle these products — everything from what the plants soak up, to evaporation, to water consumed by farm and transportation workers — is difficult to calculate. It depends not only on the specific crop, but also on things like the weather while it's growing and the efficiency of the farm, which can vary by a factor of 10 or more.

But the University of California's Agricultural Issues Centre in Davis has compiled figures that allow some back-of-the-envelope calculations of how much water has been absorbed and is retained by fruits and vegetables that cross the international border in a year.

For lettuce it works out to almost 250 million litres, or roughly enough to meet Vancouverites' needs for two weeks. And lettuce is only the second-biggest water carrier. The volume for grapes — wine, raisins, table grapes and juice — is about 15 times higher.

All other farm products — blueberries, figs, pistachios and much more — carry less water across the border than these two, some quite a lot less. But there are 45 such products, and the aggregate total is in the ballpark of a year's worth of water for a city our size. Plus, to repeat, the much larger volume of water consumed in production.

Given the intensity and duration of California's drought — in its third year and ranging from "extreme" in most of the state to the even worse classification of "exceptional" in much of the ultra-productive Central Valley — there's credence to the argument that Canadians are helping to drink California dry.

So, not surprisingly, our produce prices are rising. The cost of fruit and nuts has risen 4.7 per cent since last year, according to the Consumer Price Index, and fresh vegetables are up 9.3 per cent.

Yet, says scientist Bill Matthews of the Agricultural Issues Center, this may be the tip of the iceberg.

Unlike grain farmers, who watch their crops wither and die when it doesn't rain, California producers irrigate to keep going long after the heaven-sent water stops falling.

Draining surface reservoirs, as they've done, is a problem, but good rain or run-off replenishes them quickly. But also draining the deep underground aquifers, which they've also done, is much more serious, Matthews said.

"Our farmers rely on saved water," he said. "When our aquifers, which hold vast amounts of saved water, get depleted, they replenish much more slowly."

Matthews said California farmers are already making tough choices, saving the limited water available for high-value crops and letting the low-value ones go. But, especially given the competition with cities for what little water's left, even this option may soon disappear.

“Then prices will really rise.”

So British Columbians ought to be praying for the rain in California. Not to mention coming up with our own Plan B to keep fruits and veggies on our tables.

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