

Passion for the Land



A Collaborative Project to help rural residents share stories about preserving community heritage while protecting agricultural lands & natural resources for future generations

Chasing Water by Carol Dobbas



I moved to Sierra Valley in 1977 after graduating from the University of Idaho. My first impression of this beautiful ALPINE valley, surrounded by Forest lands and fed by mountain creeks was: THIS IS God's Country.

SIERRA VALLEY hasn't changed much since those first years, thanks to the commitment of local ranch families and town residents. So in 2004, when talk about an agricultural water regulatory program started; it was hard to believe we really needed such a thing. Here we are, as close to the source of pristine water as anyone in the state.

Statewide, Regional Water Boards began to require all irrigated ag producers, like my husband and I, to comply with and pay for a regulatory program. Our region, the Central Valley Region is the largest. It stretches from Modoc County on the Oregon border down Kern County at the southern end. However, most of the focus, is on central valley ag production issues; and the regulatory program tends to be developed, around those concerns; and then enforced across the entire region in areas that don't necessarily have the same problems.

Most of us here in Sierra Valley were convinced, that with some initial monitoring, we could show, that water here is clean. And, THAT cattle grazing and hay production, in these mountain watersheds, has little to no impact on state waters; making strong regulatory intervention not really necessary.

So we formed the Upper Feather River Watershed Group, and I stepped up to serve as the Executive Director. Our GOAL is to provide a peer group to help share knowledge and involve as many local ranchers in this "water quality thing". So now I am involved at several levels: as a lifetime cattle rancher who relies on water for grass and hay production, as part of the water monitoring team, and as a representative for the group at the greater coalition regional meetings.



Working with the ranchers to collect samples from the creeks that supply our surface irrigation water; has given me a chance to visit with more of my neighbors; and I am encouraged by their own desires to take care of this resource.

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I remember one cold blustery spring day; we met up with a rancher to locate some sampling sites on his place. Driving along on our ATVs, this rancher, with his two dogs clinging to the back basket; was obviously more accustomed, to high speed maneuvers across boggy fields and very questionable ditch crossings, than our monitoring team. He led us to find 3 ideal sampling sites on his 10,000 acre ranch. You have to give these guys credit, for stepping up to the plate; and giving the monitoring team and university folks access to their private property. Each one has seemed genuinely interested in cooperating, as we study how water quality might be affected by grazing lands here in Sierra Valley.

I have learned a lot by attending the many meetings and workshops; and also from working with



the dedicated university people who have come to our area to help conduct the research we need to support our efforts. I would like to think they might have learned something from my rancher perspective as well. In fact, we rely on this shared exchange, and research, to provide data that will demonstrate, that grazing management practices and water quality efforts are compatible.

As ag producers, we realize that water issues have become one of the most important challenges facing agriculture today, especially here in highly populated California. Our task is to convince decision makers, and the general public as well, that water used in Ag Production, is as important as water for residential & recreational uses. Agriculture needs water and people need agriculture. I am hopeful that we can modify the current regulatory program, so that dollars that now leave our community can stay here for local water quality projects. Then we will be on the right track.

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