

GO GREEN MONDAY TO DITCH THE DROUGHT

Katie Cantrell

As most Californians have heard by now, our state has been in the throes of a severe drought for the past five years. 2014 was the state's driest year since record keeping began in 1895, and 2015 was nearly as dry. Over half of the state's counties have been labeled primary natural disaster areas due to the drought.¹

Amidst this crisis, much attention is being given to ways that citizens can help reduce our water usage. Counties are imposing fines for over-watering lawns. Billboards and public service announcements urge people to take shorter showers and turn off the tap while brushing their teeth. A 2015 law prohibits restaurants from serving water unless specifically requested by customers.

These exhortations are well intentioned, but there's a glaring problem. Household consumption accounts for just 4 percent of water usage in California. Industrial agriculture accounts for over 90 percent, with roughly half of that water used by the meat and dairy industries. Rather than looking at our faucets, we should be looking at our forks.

By far the most effective way for consumers to decrease our water usage is to eat less meat and dairy. A single quarter-pound hamburger patty takes about 450 gallons of water to produce, while a veggie burger with equivalent protein requires 40 gallons of water. A gallon of milk takes 880 gallons of water to produce, while a gallon of soymilk with equivalent calcium takes 100-200 gallons of water.²

The California Water Board's website advises that by reducing shower times by one to two minutes people can save five gallons of water. They fail to mention that by switching from a hamburger to a veggie burger, or cow milk to soymilk, people can save as much water as an entire month's worth of showers.

Decreasing meat and dairy consumption will also help protect the remaining water from pollution. There are over nine billion animals raised for food every year in the United States, and all animals poop. In fact, farm animals in the United States produce 130 times more waste than the entire U.S. human population. Yet there are no sewage pipes or treatment plants for animal waste; most of it is sprayed onto land surrounding factory farms, where it seeps into local water tables and runs off into local rivers. According to the EPA, manure from farm animals is a leading cause of water pollution in the United States, polluting 35,000 miles of river in 22 states.³

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This issue recently gained national attention when the residents of Toledo, Ohio, were told not to drink, wash, or cook with their tap water due to a toxic algae bloom in Lake Erie, which supplies Toledo's water. Both fertilizer runoff from farms growing corn and soy to feed to animals on factory farms and waste from those animals themselves have been implicated in the toxic bloom.

Thus the best way to both maintain and protect our water supply is to decrease the demand for water-intensive and water-polluting animal products.

Luckily, it's never been easier to eat a more plant-based diet. An international initiative called Green Monday is drawing attention to the connection between food choices and sustainability by encouraging individuals and institutions to choose vegetarian options every Monday.

While it may not seem like one day per week would have a large impact, a person eating a plant-based diet saves 600 gallons (or more) of water per day, compared to someone eating the standard American diet. So if everyone in the country ate no meat or dairy just one day per week, it would save at least 192 billion gallons of water each week and roughly 10 trillion gallons in a year! Of course, choosing plant-based meals multiple days per week makes an even greater impact. But we all have to begin somewhere; starting the week off in a healthy, sustainable way makes us more likely to make good choices for the rest of the week.

Pledge to go Green Monday, and remember that every time you choose a plant-based meal, you're reducing your "foodprint" and helping the environment in a powerful, tangible way.

NOTES

¹ This commentary was originally published online by APPSI and its affiliate, the Japan Policy Research Institute, as *JPRI Critique* Vol. 21 No. 5 (July 2015).

² "How Much H₂O is Embedded in Everyday Life?" National Geographic website (<http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/freshwater/embedded-water/>). Accessed May 21, 2015.

³ "Reducing Water Pollution from Animal Feeding Operations." Statement of Michael Cook (Director, Office of Wastewater Management) and Elaine Stanley (Director, Office of Compliance, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) before the Subcommittee on Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry and the Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research of the Committee on Agriculture, U. S. House of Representatives. May 13, 1998.