

Viewpoints: Ag must brace for a changing climate

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Gov.-elect Jerry Brown has an opportunity to make a strong commitment to some important issues in agriculture. California leads the nation, producing 400 crop and livestock commodities and supplying half of the country's fruits, nuts and vegetables. It is vital that agriculture remain strong, providing food security for California and the nation. A changing climate and budget deficit add to the challenge.

California's Central Valley is the last great Mediterranean-climate agricultural area in the world. Along with our highly productive coastal valleys, it must continue to provide food for generations.



Yet farmland continues to be gobbled up by urban sprawl at an unsustainable rate, diminishing our ability to produce food and fiber, and eliminating the climate benefits of carbon sequestration. We must fully fund the state's farmland protection programs, including the Williamson Act, and conservation easement programs.

The beauty of a Mediterranean climate is dry summers that mean crops don't rot from rainfall, but also means that irrigation is needed. Just as Brown's father, Gov. Pat Brown, is remembered for developing California's water supply system, now is the time to comprehensively tackle updating the state's water system.

Consistent and abundant food production and a growing population need a reliable water supply. At the same time we must resolve the environmental issues in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and elsewhere in the state. We need more conservation, reclamation and recycling, along with more surface and groundwater storage. The challenge is great because of all the diverse interests in our large state; it's made even more challenging by climate change.

Though agriculture produces only 6 percent of California's greenhouse gases, it will be disproportionately affected by a changing climate, including diminished water supply, the extremes and unpredictability of weather events, shifting pest and disease patterns, decreased chill hours, and more – all of which threaten productivity and profitability.

Also, the energy needed for producing food and fiber makes California's farms and ranches particularly susceptible to price shocks and increasing energy costs associated with fossil fuel dependence. If California's \$35 billion agriculture industry is to be sustainable, these vulnerabilities must be addressed.

But there's more to this story than just problems: There is also an opportunity for agriculture to respond with innovation. California is home to innovative agricultural producers who are reducing their carbon footprint and minimizing their energy and water use through greater efficiency and conservation.

Not only that, but working lands have the capacity to store atmospheric carbon in soils and woody biomass on millions of acres, and to provide open space for recharging valuable groundwater.

And while much has been invested in next-generation renewable energy technology, the potential to produce it from biomass, solar and wind on farms and ranches is under-realized in our state.

We must harmonize the maze of regulations and lift the barriers to on-farm renewable energy to fully realize our energy future.

More agricultural research is needed to keep California on the cutting edge, from organic methods to new crop varieties, to produce more food for more people, and at the same time identify the best practices for reducing greenhouse gases, sequestering carbon and providing a variety of conservation benefits.

Technical assistance will be imperative to aid producers in identifying best practices for their operations and navigating the complexities of science and policy. And producers will need incentives to support the shift to clean energy and climate-friendly practices. Jerry Brown's new term as governor gives him the opportunity to play a critical role in this nexus of agriculture, water, clean energy development and climate change.

California's Global Warming Solutions Act, AB 32, will be implemented in the next few years. Countries and regions around the world will be watching and following California's trailblazing efforts to balance economic recovery with environmental stewardship. California agriculture's contribution to the state, nation and world is a critical issue of national security.

In the 1970s and '80s, Brown led the way in developing energy efficiency measures that made California a national leader. That same innovative, bold leadership is needed from him now to support the state and its agriculture in tackling these most pressing challenges.

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