



# Drought Emergency Brings Challenges to CAC Water Pricing Campaign

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**A**s the current drought emergency in California becomes increasingly perilous, the California Avocado Commission's (CAC) ongoing effort to negotiate affordable agricultural water in the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) service area has become even more challenging. If you were to write a script of what elements you would want before approaching a water agency for a

reduced water cost for agriculture, a drought emergency would not be included. Rather, it would more aptly be considered part of a perfect storm (pun intended). Unfortunately, as is usually the case, we aren't able to write the perfect script, and so we find ourselves preparing to argue for affordable water for agricultural users in the midst of the worst drought California has faced in more than 100 years.

Adding to the difficulty surrounding CAC's efforts is the fact that MWD remains embroiled in a court case, making MWD reluctant participants in any cost discussion for fear of jeopardizing their position. Ultimately, with the situation for growers continuing to get worse and the "ideal" time for CAC to submit a formal agriculture water proposal to MWD becoming increasingly elusive, in spite of the above mentioned factors, the decision has been made to move forward. In February 2014, Charley Wolk, CAC Water Committee chair, provided comments at an MWD committee meeting notifying them that CAC would be presenting an initial proposal within the next few weeks.

For more than a year, the CAC team has been working with key MWD staff and board members to communicate the benefits Southern California agriculture provides as a reliable customer for MWD and to the community. University of California studies have also been initiated by CAC to determine the economic value generated by farming and agribusiness along with identifying environmental benefits. Last year CAC conducted a survey of MWD residential customers to determine their willingness to accept an increase in costs that would provide for affordable agricultural water. The results of the survey reveal that the vast majority of voters are willing to support affordable agricultural water rates for farms and other agricultural producers to support a regional goal of encouraging food production in and around Southern California. An initial assessment of support revealed that nearly three out of four residential customers (74 percent) support the program, 18 percent oppose it, and the remaining eight percent are undecided. The results were encouraging as nearly three-quarters of those

surveyed supported an increase of up to \$6 per year on their bills to help strengthen agriculture.

CAC has also been working to get community leaders, politicians and conservationists (just to name a few) involved in our water pricing effort, asking them to engage in a conversation on the importance of affordable water for agriculture. The value of locally grown produce is a common theme among many of our retail partners, and CAC has communicated how important it is for them to weigh in on this issue. CAC is also working to mobilize divergent interests and asking them to take a stand through newspaper commentaries, social media outreach and maybe even as spokespeople in front of media and decision makers.

In reality, though, for someone to move from a silent supporter to a vocal advocate they have to be significantly impacted. Unfortunately, in this situation, the most likely way for that to occur is if consumers, retailers, conservationists, environmentalists — the list goes on and on — are personally impacted by a major reduction in California-grown fresh produce and see the collateral consequences like lost jobs or disappearing open space. Obviously no one wants to see that happen, but apathy is always present, so CAC is working hard to ensure that outcome is avoided by sounding the alarm and asking that steps be taken now to strengthen Southern California agriculture for the future. With MWD in the middle of setting rates for both the 2015 and 2016 years, and no likely change in drought conditions in the near future, it now appears there's no time like the present. With a lot of hard work, and a little bit of luck, maybe, just maybe, history will show that the "ideal" time was now. 🍌

