

Back to Basics for California's Water and Agriculture — Putting the People Who Feed Us First



Matt Mahan grew up in an agricultural community here in California, where he saw firsthand how much California depends on the people who grow our food — and how vulnerable those communities are when water systems fail.

California agriculture feeds the nation and drives more than \$60 billion in economic output each year, supporting nearly one million jobs. But today, the people who make that possible are getting squeezed — by unreliable water, rising costs, and a system that hasn't kept pace with reality. And Sacramento has too often responded with delay, bureaucracy, and litigation instead of results.



This is a failure hiding in plain sight.

Because **the next drought will not look like the last one.**

It will arrive at a time when groundwater is already constrained, storage capacity has gone largely unexpanded for a generation, and aging infrastructure is falling further behind each year. **In parts of the state, water supplies could decline by roughly 20% by 2040 — even before the next major drought hits.**

If we don't act, the consequences won't be theoretical.

They will show up in fallowed farmland, lost jobs, unsafe drinking water, and higher costs for families across California. When California agriculture struggles, families feel it everywhere: at the grocery store, in their water bills, and in the rising cost of living.

Here's the truth: **California doesn't have a water scarcity problem — we have a water management problem.**

And unfortunately, **the vast majority of Democrats continue to shy away from building new water supply.**

For too long, our approach has focused on managing scarcity instead of building abundance. We've asked families to cut back during droughts instead of fixing the system. We've allowed critical infrastructure projects to stall for decades. And we've made it too hard to deploy proven technologies that can expand our water supply.

Matt Mahan is fighting to change that.

California Agriculture Feeds the Nation

FACT: California agriculture feeds the nation and drives more than \$60 billion in economic output each year, supporting nearly one million jobs.



\$60B+ Industry

Produces over 1/2 of U.S. vegetables



~1 Million Jobs

Produces over 3/4 of U.S. fruits & nuts

Source: California Department of Food and Agriculture, Value of California Ag production tops \$60 billion for first time, 2025; California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, New State Investments Help Farmworkers Gain Skills and Career Opportunities, 2024; California Department of Food and Agriculture, California Agricultural Production Statistics, 2025

He supports accelerating proven, long-delayed solutions — including building the Sites Reservoir, expanding storage at San Luis Reservoir, and scaling desalination and water recycling technologies that were pioneered in California but never deployed at the level we need.

We can't control the climate. But we can control how we prepare for it.

That means moving beyond a system that manages scarcity and instead building one that delivers abundance — by investing in storage, speeding up deployment of proven technologies, and supporting farmers and communities through the transition to a more sustainable groundwater system.

This isn't just an agricultural issue — it's a cost-of-living issue for every Californian.

If we get this right, we can lower costs, increase reliability, and finally end the cycle of crisis and rationing — for our cities, our farms, and our environment.

INVESTING IN NEW WATER SUPPLIES COULD REDUCE FARMLAND FOLLOWING BY 26-45% AND REDUCE GDP LOSSES BY UP TO 60%.

HERE IS HIS PLAN >>

Matt Mahan's Plan for California's Water and Agriculture

1. **INVEST IN INNOVATION: SECURE AND MODERNIZE OUR WATER SUPPLY**

- ▶ **Developing New Water Supplies:** Developing new supplies (including groundwater recharge, storage and reuse) could reduce farmland following by 26–45% and GDP losses by 58–61%. We must invest in the systems that increase supply — not just manage scarcity.
- **Expand Storage:** Build and modernize reservoirs and conveyance (including Sites and San Luis Reservoirs and the Delta Conveyance Tunnel) to capture water in wet years.



- **Accelerate Groundwater Recharge:** We will scale recharge basins and aquifer projects that store water underground, paired with improved diversion and conveyance to capture high-flow water in wet years. **Groundwater supplies up to 60% of California’s water in dry years** — we must replenish it.
- ▶ **Build Local Water Independence:** We will expand wastewater reuse and strategic coastal desalination so cities can produce their own drought-proof supply — reducing pressure on agricultural regions. Orange County’s Groundwater Replenishment System, for example, is the largest wastewater reuse system in the world, producing 130 million gallons daily, serving nearly 1 million people across 19 cities and water districts.
- ▶ **Fix Aging Infrastructure:** We cannot just focus on new projects; we must reinvest in and modernize aging water systems like canal subsidence repair projects to reduce losses, improve efficiency, and support reliability. **California is managing a \$10B+ infrastructure problem with temporary fixes.**
- ▶ **Ensure Safe Drinking Water:** A basic function of government is ensuring clean water. **Nearly 1 million Californians lack reliable access to safe water, with 1.8 million more at risk** — disproportionately impacting low-income communities of color. We must directly address the ongoing crisis of unsafe drinking water and failing groundwater quality in disadvantaged rural communities by fixing aging systems, reducing contamination, and closing funding gaps under the SAFER Program.
- ▶ **Invest in Desalination:** California developed desalination technology, but never deployed it at scale. Matt supports increasing this tool, especially in cities and coastal regions where reuse cannot meet demand.

California’s Drinking Water Crisis

FACT: Nearly 1 million Californians lack reliable access to safe drinking water — and 1.8 million more are at risk as hundreds of water systems fail.

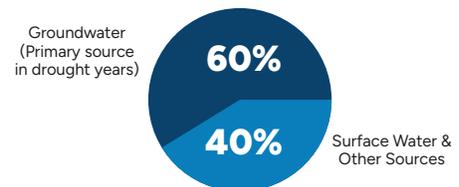


Source: CalMatters; Drinking water of almost a million Californians failed to meet state requirements; 2024

Groundwater Is California’s Lifeline in Drought

FACT: In dry years, groundwater supplies up to 60% of California’s water — making recharge and sustainable management critical.

Where California’s Water Comes From in Dry Years



Source: California Department of Water Resources, Groundwater, 2026

2. SUPPORT FARMERS & GROWERS – DON’T JUST REGULATE THEM

- ▶ **Local, State, and Federal Coordination:** Our state’s water challenges can’t be solved farm by farm; they require better coordination across local, state, and federal partners.

▶ **Support the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) Transition:** Groundwater reductions are coming — and without action, **up to 900,000 acres of farmland could be fallowed.** By 2040, water supplies could fall by roughly 20% in the San Joaquin Valley due to SGMA, climate pressures, and environmental constraints. We will proactively ease this transition by:

- **Accelerating new water supplies:** Invest \$1B+/year in recycling, desalination, and storage to offset SGMA-driven supply reductions — **protecting productive farmland and jobs.**
- **Enabling water markets and technology:** Streamline water transfers, expand drip irrigation, and incentivize high-value crop shifts to maximize productivity on shrinking supplies.

■ **Supporting communities and land transitions:** Provide job retraining, deliver drinking water fixes for 1 million Californians, and invest in solar and habitat repurposing of idled farmland to mitigate dust and economic fallout.

▶ **A “Whole Farm Plan” for Red Tape:** Farmers are drowning in rising costs, permitting delays, and regulatory inefficiency across overlapping agencies. Matt will advance a “Whole Farm Plan” allowing growers to comply once — not dozens of times.

▶ **Expand Water Access & Markets:** We will ease opportunities for water transfers to mitigate risk for small, local farmers who need to adjust water usage more efficiently — while protecting existing water rights. This means streamlining regulations, eliminating unnecessary delays, and establishing pre-approved trading zones and rules to improve water access and flexibility. Water trading could reduce economic losses from SGMA by up to 50%.

Nearly 1 Million Acres of Farmland At Risk

FACT: By 2040, water supply in the San Joaquin Valley — the heart of California agriculture — could decline by about 20%, putting up to 900,000 acres of farmland and 50,000 jobs at risk, with ripple effects across California’s food supply and economy.



Source: PPIC; Policy Brief: The Future of Agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley; 2023



**WATER TRADING COULD
REDUCE ECONOMIC LOSSES
FROM SGMA BY UP TO 50%.**

▶ **Protect Export Markets:** The 2025 trade war cost billions in lost exports from California — our state’s agriculture depends on global trade. We must defend market access and protect growers from trade disruptions.

3. INVEST IN THE RURAL WORKFORCE

- ▶ **Expand the Rural Workforce:** California's agricultural workers are the backbone of our economy, yet growers report being 20% short on workers in peak seasons — driving up costs, limiting production, and accelerating the shift away from labor-intensive crops. We will support rural communities by protecting the domestic agricultural workforce who are essential long-term contributors to local economies, while simultaneously pushing for federal H-2A visa reform and protections to address seasonal labor shortages.



**GROWERS REPORT
LABOR SHORTAGES OF
ROUGHLY 20% DURING
PEAK SEASONS.**

- ▶ **Invest in Workforce Training and Technology:** We should also invest in what works, ensuring agricultural workforce training and education programs at California universities are keeping pace with technological and other advances in the sector. Even modest productivity gains could offset roughly half of the economic transition costs of SGMA by 2040 — even without new supplies or water trading.

4. INVEST IN ALTERNATIVE LAND USES

- ▶ **Repurpose Fallowed Land:** Even with improved management, significant farmland will be fallowed, potentially up to 500,000 acres in the San Joaquin Valley alone. We must plan for this — not react to it. Converting fallowed lands for renewable energy, managed aquifer recharge, parks, and wildlife corridors will protect farmers from loss, restore managed ecosystems, protect air quality, and manage infestations.
- ▶ **Supporting On-Farm Recharge:** On-farm recharge is already growing — we need better incentives, education, and water accounting systems to expand it statewide.

Conclusion

A BETTER PATH FORWARD

California has everything we need to get this right — the innovation, the talent, and the resources to build a water system that actually works.

What we've been missing is the will to act.

For too long, we've accepted a system that manages scarcity instead of building abundance — asking families and farmers to conserve while failing to fix the infrastructure and expand the supply they depend on.

That approach isn't working.

Matt Mahan's plan is about changing course: investing in the water systems we need, cutting through the delays that have stalled progress for decades, and supporting the farmers, workers, and communities who keep California running.

Because this isn't just about water policy — it's about whether California can still deliver on the basics.

Safe drinking water.

Affordable food.

Reliable infrastructure.

If we get this right, we can lower costs, strengthen our economy, and build a more resilient future for every Californian.

And if we don't, we will keep repeating the same cycle of crisis and rationing — with higher costs and fewer options each time.

California can do better.

And it's time we did.



Endnotes

1. Public Policy Institute of California, "Policy Brief: The Future of Agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley," 2023.
 2. Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics, University of California, "How California Farmers Are Adapting to a Shrinking Labor Force," 2025.
 3. Cal Matters, "Drinking water of almost a million Californians failed to meet state requirements," 2024.
 4. Labor and Work Force Development Agency, "New State Investment Help Farmworkers Gain Skills and Career Opportunities," 2025.
 5. California Department of Food and Agriculture, "Value of California Ag production tops \$60 billion for the first time," 2025.
 6. California Department of Food and Agriculture, "California Agricultural Production Statistics," 2025.
 7. California Department of Water Resources, "Groundwater," 2026.
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