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Food for Thought

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There's no better time than now for the American public to appreciate the "water-energy-food nexus," or as I like to call it, the "liquid triangle of life". To farmers across the U.S., particularly the Midwest, it's painfully obvious: The historic drought, sweeping across the land like a silent tsunami, is wreaking economic, environmental, and emotional havoc in its wake.

It should be a wake-up call for all of us to value water, appreciate the embedded role it plays in our economy, and manage it wisely (saving for a rainy day as well as preparing for rain-less days).

A USA Today article, "Drought Impact Has Dry Ripple Effect," (by Judy Keen, 1B August 3, 2012) underscores powerfully the points and linkages between rain and food, feed and biofuel, water and electricity. For the coming months in the nation's bread basket, the Great Plains and Grains States, less rain will mean more pain and eventually higher prices for consumers. July was particularly rough for corn. August may be just as punishing for soybeans.

Keen describes the drought's multiple effects on meat. Meat prices will first fall and then steadily rise. Some farmers will sell off their herds because they can't afford the higher costs of feed due to the scarcity of water. USDA reports the size of the nation's cattle herd was 97.8 million in July, the lowest since counting began in 1973. Some will liquidate their entire businesses because their most precious liquid asset, water, is unavailable or indirectly driving costs too high.

The water-based crisis also highlights the running debate over "food vs. fuel". Keen notes that meat and poultry interests are petitioning the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to temporarily waive the Renewable Fuels Standard mandate (based on the Energy Policy Act of 2005 and the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007) requiring petroleum blenders to use corn-based ethanol in gasoline. The idea is to free-up more corn for feed to help farmers during the drought. The petition is also a reminder of the potential trade-offs that can arise when balancing air quality and biofuel mandates with water quantity and water quality considerations. As the drought's dry reach affects more than 60% of the contiguous U.S., one has to wonder whether there will also be a rush to develop less water-intensive biofuels and more fuels that steer clear of the food vs. fuel debate. One example, algae biofuels, offers great promise but not in the immediate future. Despite growing investments by the private sector and university research centers, it may take 5 years or more to see widespread application of algae biofuel technologies.

The "liquid triangle of life" theme is playing out in policy circles far from the U.S.'s drying fields. [Stockholm International Water Institute's](#) (SIWI) World Water Week, August 26-31 in Stockholm Sweden, has as its over-all theme, water and food security. Water leaders will also use the global conference to continue emphasis on energy, water, and climate connections. In addition, [this year's winner](#) of SIWI's prestigious Stockholm Water Prize is the [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#) based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. According to SIWI:

"[IWMI](#) is being honored for its pioneering research that has served to improve agriculture water management, enhance food security, protect environmental health, and reduce poverty in developing countries.... The 2011 publication, *An Ecosystem Services Approach to Water and Food Security*, led by [IWMI](#) and the United Nations Environment Programme, outlined how a new 'ecosystems-based' approach to agriculture can protect natural systems and potentially double agricultural production. The continued work in this area can radically change how agriculture is practiced in the future and ensure food security for a global population set to reach 9 billion by 2050."

The more we can connect the dots, drops, and watts, and see the watery links between food, feed, and fuel, the better.



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