We’re all Californians

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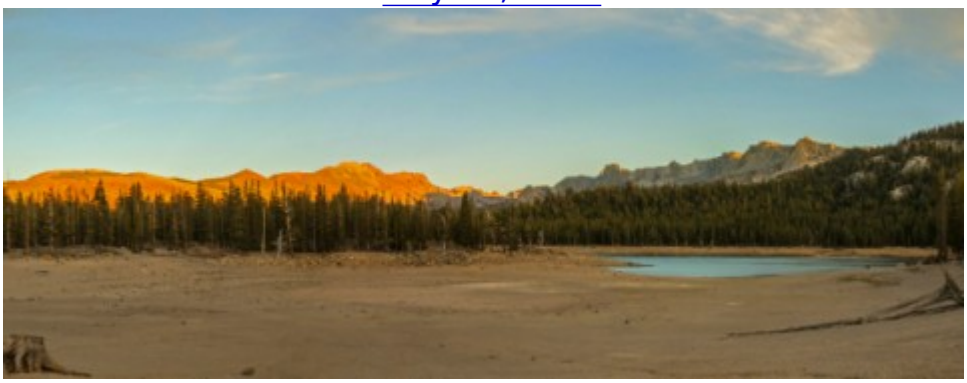

A dry lake bed in Mammoth Lakes, California. Photo by Thinkstock

No rain in California—which grows half the country’s fruits and vegetables—is a disaster for all of us. But the drought, now entering its fourth year, is also an opportunity. It’s a chance to take a long-needed hard look at how water is used and conserved, how food is grown, and what sustainable development means.

With 80 percent of California’s water usage devoted to agriculture, that’s the first place to make major changes. “Most watering technology is stupid and doesn’t react to the environment,” says CEO Chris Spain of the water technology firm HydroPoint. “We shouldn’t be talking about a 25 percent reduction in water use, but rather a 95 percent elimination of wasted water.” In fact, many California farmers have already become water technicians, measuring soil and leaf moisture content and treating every drop as utterly precious.

According to Joshua Haggmark, a water resources manager in Santa Barbara, the needed studies on groundwater sustainability have yet to be done. In California, he said, “people just kind of pump as much as they want” from the ground. “There is no control, no oversight, and unfortunately it’s gotten a lot of basins in trouble.”

While technological solutions for recovering water are important, so are lifestyle changes. Residents in arid regions are learning to cultivate desert plants and to forget about green lawns. People across the country can learn about growing their own vegetables and encouraging local agriculture. Relying on food transported all the way from California to the rest of the country was perhaps never sustainable.

We also need to gain a better understanding of just how much development a particular piece of land can sustain. There are limits to population growth in the arid Southwest.

As farmers adopt new practices and the state imposes a 25 percent reduction on municipal water consumption, one industry that uses water hasn’t budged: oil. The kind of hydraulic fracking done in California is not as water intensive as other kinds, and some estimates say that fracking in California amounts to a tiny fraction of 1 percent of overall water usage. But at this point, every gallon counts. And unlike water used in agriculture, the water used for fracking is chemically tainted and cannot be recycled.

Potable water is fast becoming more precious than oil—a calculation that will transform the global economy. We are learning how climate, consumption, water, oil, and agriculture are all interconnected in a way that calls for a nationwide reckoning. When it comes to the drought, we are all Californians.