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# Drought: California agriculture can learn from Africa

By Danielle Nierenberg and Daniel Bornstein | Special to the Mercury News

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Vast tracts of Southern California's bountiful harvests are fading from view, as millions of acres of irrigated land have been removed from production as a result of drought.

Over the past few years, this drought has left farms and livestock in California thirsty and farmers unsure of what to do. And it has forced the areas with the most overexploited groundwater basins to develop sustainable local water management plans.

But these areas can learn a lot about innovative water conservation practices by looking outward -- toward the fields of smallholder food producers in sub-Saharan Africa. Their local innovations can offer concrete examples as farmers statewide and in the United States attempt to limit their dependence on water resources. Sunday was World Water Day, a fitting time to gather momentum toward such an important shift.

Farmers in Mali, for example, convened a "citizens' jury" with the help of the International Institute for the Environment and Development, and proposed that crop researchers hone in on traditional seed varieties. These crops are typically better at withstanding drought-- and can offer more resilience for farmers' livelihoods than so-called high-yielding varieties that often get touted as the solution for African food insecurity.

And the Grow Biointensive Agriculture Center of Kenya is encouraging small producers to introduce nitrogen-fixing cover crops -- such as beans planted between rows of the staple corn crop -- as a replacement for costly chemical fertilizer out of a bag. In addition, these crops can help prevent water erosion, allowing farmers to still fare well during low rainfall years.



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While these practices may seem out of place in an industrialized agricultural machine like California, they offer important lessons. Producers and consumers need to shift their fields and their palates to less water-intensive crop varieties.

The California Climate and Agriculture Network recently issued recommendations to Gov. Jerry Brown outlining a vision for

agriculture in the face of climate change. The report called on him to urge state agencies to place greater emphasis on farm management strategies that improve the soil's water-holding capacity, including planting so-called "cover crops" to prevent water runoff.

And farmers across California last year ramped up tomato production to combat drought and increase their incomes, shifting away from less valuable commodities. Tomato processors sought out suppliers in areas where they didn't have contracts with growers. As a result, the state witnessed a record tomato harvest last year.

For all this ingenuity, a major challenge to seeing wider adoption of effective techniques is the lack of access to information. To fill that void, the McKnight Foundation, as part of its Collaborative Crop Research Program, has developed the Agroecological Intensification Exchange. The database will include specific case studies and can be used by practitioners and researchers around the world. With the exchange's aggregation of various success stories, California agriculture will have a wealth of examples to draw from.

California already has the strategic research infrastructure in place to make this transformation happen. The University of California system hosts some of the world's most prominent agricultural research institutions, anchored by a vast network of experts and extension agents. Let's harness their long tradition of ingenuity to learn from Africa's smallholders, who we have a lot to learn from.

Danielle Nierenberg is president of Food Tank ([www.foodtank.com](http://www.foodtank.com)) (<http://www.foodtank.com>), and Daniel Bornstein is a research assistant. They wrote this for this newspaper.

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