

Winthrop University Interdisciplinary Water Conference

Abstract

Water Resources and Plant-Based Eating: Radical Lifestyle or Reality Check?

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Just this week, two interconnecting pieces of information helped to draw our attention to how the vital resource of water may be related to the long-held practice of raising and consuming animals for food. The first is the unprecedented state-wide mandatory water reductions put into place by California Governor Jerry Brown on April 1. The second is the April 5 report from the federal Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, made up of nutritionists, who decided for the first time this year to factor in environmental sustainability as it considered its recommendations.

A full 50% of water use in the United States is in animal agriculture, giving added context to increasing water shortages in California and elsewhere. The federal panel considering sustainability and diet found that a diet lower in animal-based foods is not only healthier for people, but also has less of a negative environmental impact, including impact on the use of water resources. These two data points are just a few of the many we are seeing weekly, as people reflect on the use of water in animal agribusiness, and as we study the impacts of the food production system on people, the animals themselves, and our planet.

This paper will focus on exploring some of the wealth of information we now have connecting the commodification of farmed animals to degradation of the environment in multiple ways, highlighting water concerns. Intersecting human, animal, and environmental social justice will be considered through the application of social work's ecological perspective, deep ecology theory, social movement theory, and anti-oppressive and critical social work ideas. Participants will have the opportunity to engage in critical thinking about these issues and to consider whether a global, plant-based agriculture system is unnecessarily drastic, or if it may be a practical and thoughtful reality whose time has come.