

Every drop matters

Overly complex. Highly litigious. Subject to severe shortages. Critical for the long-term survival of the nursery and greenhouse industry. Got water?

It's one of the essential needs for any nursery operation and one that needs a regional and national solution.

There is little doubt that along with land, labor and transportation, water is a key ingredient for the production and growing of plants. Without it, nurseries would be in a world of trouble. Unfortunately, water supplies are not likely to be as plentiful in the future as they were in the past.

Changes in our climate have been taking their toll on mountain snowpacks, which up to now have served as a free reservoir for water supply users. That's a double blow because actual reservoirs are almost impossible to build due to environmental regulations and huge financial resource considerations.

Additionally, hydrologists have been discovering the connection between underground aquifers and surface water, prompting regulators to regulate them in conjunctive ways, thereby reducing the actual water supply that people had assumed, on paper, to exist previously.

The result of all these factors is that new supplies of water — previously available just for the asking — are increasingly difficult to obtain.

The Oregon Association of Nurseries has embarked on efforts toward maximizing water supplies that exist. It has formed nontraditional alliances with other user groups, including the conservation community, agriculture and municipalities. Together, we passed the first water supply development bill in the history of the state. It provides a blueprint for dealing with any water that remains unallocated, and opens up the possibility of water rights transfers.

Our direct involvement is not just

after one solution, but a vigorous continuum of planning, feasibility and projects that help farms, fish and families throughout the state.

Nurseries lead by example

For many years, Oregon has been a leader on the reuse of water, and nurseries have played a key role. By knowing how to recapture, treat and reuse water, nurseries have already taken large steps to ensure they have a larger and cleaner water supply.

Even so, this approach is limited if the amount of water coming in is limited. If that's the case, what to do? Efficiency is the obvious answer.

Nursery operations are the perfect laboratory to examine tools, identify incentives and create a pathway to afford and implement solutions. The industry has benefited from learning from one another. We have been innovators.

Candidly, the great work that association leaders promoted is starting to show its age after three decades, not only in terms of the actual infrastructure, but also in methods of efficiency and a tangled legal web that is more about environmental theology than sensible solutions.

The market itself has shifted. Drought and a lack of water is slowly changing the consumer market, just as surely as they are changing what nurseries can do. There is great promise and opportunity to take this challenge and turn it into an economic and environmental benefit.

Efforts to improve water quality and eliminate runoff problems have opened up new markets where plants can provide ecosystem services as part of riparian restoration projects.

Battle lines

My friend and colleague Joe Whitworth serves as president of The Freshwater Trust. He's fond of saying that the world has all the water it will ever have, right here and now. The issue is how to get water from where it is to where we need it.

I could not agree more. The glaring



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lack of a long-term water vision, hair-trigger lawsuits that try to disembowel agricultural practices, and a pathological aversion to funding water infrastructure will be enough to undo the meaningful gains over the last three years on the water issue. There is little doubt in my mind that this confluence of challenges could lead to an uncontrolled firestorm of controversy over the "best use" of water.

Legal fractures tend to lead to political ones. Many elected officials avoid dealing in water policy. It is not simple. It has clear winners and losers. It is often framed as "the economy versus the environment."

The nursery industry can and must serve as the bridge between business and conservation groups. We have two things others don't: one, the temperament to lead in a zero-sum game, and two, the plants to deploy in creating naturally-based solutions to problems.

Great opportunity ahead

The alliance built over the past three years between irrigators, municipalities, agriculture and conservation groups has produced more potential for the future of water than we have seen in decades.

They all know that a protracted war for a limited resource will poison the well for creating a plan for infrastructure development, increased conservation and efficiency, and solving challenges created by climate change and burdensome regulations.

We can and must do better for the long-term survival of the industry. ©