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## Opinion: Proposed water cuts could dry up the Paso Robles economy

By [Chris Burchett](#) / Wednesday, September 30th, 2020 / [No Comments](#)**By Brent Burchett**

This may be news to you, but there is a plan in place that will dramatically restrict farmers from using groundwater for their crops in the Paso Robles region. If you're not directly involved in agriculture, why should you care? Here's why.

According to an economic impact study released by Cal Poly this month, these water cutbacks threaten thousands of non-farming jobs, and will change the face of San Luis Obispo County's internationally recognized wine and tourism industry. And in the face of the COVID-19 recession, how many more shuttered businesses can our local economy withstand?

A little background: The state's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act of 2014 requires California's 21 critically overdrafted groundwater basins be sustainable by 2040. Thanks in part to long-term drought conditions, the Paso Robles Subbasin is one of the subbasins deemed overdrafted.

While the path to reach sustainability in the basin is complex, requiring an unprecedented community partnership of residents, businesses, and government leaders, the popular political narrative sold to the public is deceptively simple: "Agriculture created this shortage, let's turn off their spigot."

The county's sustainability road map, called the Paso Robles Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan, proposes only sweeping cuts to irrigated agricultural use. The plan, however, never included an economic impact analysis of the cuts.

The Cal Poly study was conducted to fill that void and to urge local officials to consider other alternatives for achieving sustainability. The Cal Poly study reveals just how vital and integrated the Paso Robles wine and agriculture industries are to our Central Coast economy.

Agriculture is San Luis Obispo County's signature industry, and its fiscal reach extends well beyond the farm gate. From winery and hospitality jobs, to gas stations, shipping companies, banks and local restaurants, if Paso Robles ag is dealt a significant economic blow, it will send a shockwave through the entire community.

Let's not talk in generalities, though. According to the impact study, if the current proposed cuts to irrigated agriculture are implemented, our already COVID-hindered economy will face a number of new, and sadly self-inflicted, wounds:

- Paso Robles's overall economy could lose up to \$458 million annually.
- As many as 3,351 fulltime jobs could disappear across all sectors—from agriculture, winery and hospitality workers to healthcare and tire store employees.

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... means that to find a pragmatic solution to bring the Paso Basin into balance, it won't be large winches that feel the pain, it will be our middle class workers who may find themselves out of a job.

To be clear, everyone agrees we must be better stewards of our limited natural resources. But we need to find solutions that won't cause irreparable harm to our economy. San Luis Obispo County farmers and agriculture industry leaders are at the table and ready to talk about solutions.

Thankfully, there are many options for achieving sustainability. We can invest in new sources of water and we can increase adoption of better management practices on the farm. Cutbacks are without a doubt part of that solution, but they cannot be our only approach, no matter how politically expedient they may seem. It's time to work together and explore every option to save jobs and protect the San Luis Obispo County economy during these uncertain times.

• *Brent Burchett is the executive director of the San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau.*