

Times have reached a tipping point

THE times they are a-changin' and it is at breakneck speed. The stark reality is that most of the forces driving change are out of our control. If farming has taught us anything, it is that nature and fate have as much control over the bottom line as we do.

We debate climate change the same as presidential candidates debate election issues. Ideology aside, change is happening. Southern California marked the driest season on record. From July 1, 2006, to June 30, 2007, only 3.2 inches of rain fell in downtown Los Angeles.

EDITORIALLY SPEAKING



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Meanwhile, in Oklahoma and Texas, sixteen days of rain broke a 70-year record with 30 inches, compared with the normal 33 inches that fall annually.

And it's not just the weather. The price of low-fat milk in California, \$3.10 a gallon, now matches the price of gas.

Congress has always been slow picking up on change — climate or otherwise. Consider the 1939 Dust Bowl. It wasn't until the Oklahoma dust clouds darkened Washington, D.C., that Hugh Bennett, who almost single-handedly created the National Soil Conservation

Act, was able to convince the federal government of the need for a serious attack on soil erosion.

Back then, most High Plains farmers grew corn for whisk brooms, according to Timothy Egan's book "The Worst Hard Time;" then the vacuum cleaner ruined the broomcorn market. The book is the untold story of those who survived the Great American Dust Bowl. Prohibition saved the broomcorn farmers, making grain more valuable as alcohol.

Flash ahead to today's high milk prices and one realizes that the same demand for alcohol has farmers switching from growing corn for grain to growing corn for ethanol. This has resulted in the highest corn prices in years and the largest corn planting since Earl Butz's fencerow-to-fencerow plan to meet Soviet demand. The Soviet demand didn't last, and corn farmers have been saved by taxpayer subsidies that Congress seems destined to support despite rising corn prices.

But will taxpayers continue to feel so generous toward farmers and their subsidies as gas, milk and food prices continue to climb? The "Big Blow" of 1933 changed America forever, and the economic realities of today could rally voters to promote change with their own whisk brooms.

California's blow

California's big blow came silently on Sept. 14, 2006, and haunts to this day. There was no cracked earth, burning wind or grasshoppers — only people getting sick, some fatally, after eating spinach from our Salad Bowl. (See related articles in March 2007.)

Industry-approved GAP Metrics are in place and will be policed by state inspectors. Yet state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, is pushing three bills regarding food safety. However, Agriculture Committee members voted 4-2 against one bill, with Chairwoman Nicole Parra, D-Bakersfield, in the majority. They won't consider the other two.

Sen. Florez has as much responsibility to protect brand California as the industry. Yes, it is dangerous to have a politician like Florez vested in proving "I told you so." Even so, he and other leaders need to back current efforts to improve produce safety and work to fix them when flaws are exposed, like the lack of specific testing of *E. coli* 0157 in irrigation water. Politicians need to find ways to lead on tough issues like food safety and immigration that do not involve scaring people or undercutting other good-faith efforts.

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