

AGRICULTURE, JOBS, TOWNS: TERMINATED

ENVIROS GET THEIR WAY, BUT WHERE WILL THEY GET THEIR FOOD? BY TIM FINDLEY

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You couldn't see the irony any more than you could see the heat, but it was equally dominant as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger stood above the half-empty San Luis Reservoir and joined at least 10,000 farmworkers in their chant.

"We want water! We want water!" they called, Schwarzenegger's deep Bavarian accent heard above those around him. Mr. Universe; The Terminator; an odd Republican married into the Kennedy political dynasty; the desperation governor who took over from California's last failed executive. One of the best-known men on earth in a region that once claimed it could feed the world now joining in a futile cry of "We want water! We want water!"

Was he asking a deity to make it rain, thus ending a three-year period of less-than-normal precipitation? They call it a drought, but snowpack in the Sierra this year was at least 70 percent of normal and filled the rivers into the Central Valley with heavy runoff. He might have been appealing to Fresno Federal Judge Oliver Wanger, who ruled at the beginning of this growing season that the major portion of the valley would receive no federal irrigation supplies. But Wanger had already expressed his regret, and The Terminator just

doesn't carry more weight than the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). It brought suit on behalf of the Delta smelt, which, it argued, might go extinct without its full appropriation of water. Schwarzenegger couldn't really blame the smelt, which looks pretty much the same as every other minnow found in the region and may not have even been native to the Delta. The fish, scientists say, will survive or not, regardless of additional water. But the governor's cry on behalf of farmworkers would find deaf ears with the

NRDC, which has the Endangered Species Act on its side and privately says it doesn't think the Westside or "Westland" region should be farmed anyway.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who grew up in a near-replica irrigated valley in Colorado with even the same names such as San Luis, flew over the drought-shocked fields in a helicopter with Schwarzenegger and would later manage a meager 10 percent allocation for the farms, but he would do no more in convincing his own Bureau of Reclamation of

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the gravity of the problem.

So Schwarzenegger—much of the economy in his “Golden State” crumbling behind him—could do no more than repeat something that sounded a little like “I’ll be back,” except that the mantra was “We want water,” and it was said without promise.

The governor might be unaware of one ultimate irony in the creation of this rich agricultural region by another immigrant who



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“It’s a judicial drought,” says Jose Ramirez, the city manager of Firebaugh. “If there weren’t [private] contract water out there for some growers, I’m not sure this city would be a city anymore.”

came here during the Gold Rush and built what was the mightiest cattle empire in the world. Henry Miller and his partner Charles Lux (a German immigrant) bought, traded and claimed more than half a million acres, most of it along the San Joaquin River, and when Miller needed to prove his fields were on navigable access for riparian rights, he loaded a rowboat on the back of his wagon and towed it around the whole valley.

It was Miller, at his own expense of some \$300,000, who first brought irrigation to the valley and made possible what was once the proud economic engine of California. It is only in the last two decades that computer-related production in California has exceeded agriculture as the state’s most important product, and the Central Valley has always been the heart of California agriculture.

But don’t bother arguing that with attorneys who have the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in their pocket and a stop-the-farmer attitude in their heads. Even the *Contra Costa Times*, based along the coast near San Francisco, put its editorial feet in the fray with a clear “sustainable” bias.

“In fact, the conflict, rather than a case of ‘fish versus people,’ is a clear case of people



California’s political minnow is made into a man-eater by the Natural Resources Defense Council (Bobby Kennedy Jr’s group). With no irrigation water in the spring of 2009, crops and orchards died. More than 25,000 people are without work and there is no guarantee that fish life has improved. OPPOSITE PAGE: Arnold Schwarzenegger had no power to help 10,000 marchers at San Luis Reservoir.

employed in the commercial fishing and recreational fishing industries throughout the state and on Delta farms and businesses versus subsidized agribusiness on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. It is in reality a battle between sustainable fisheries and farms ver-

sus keeping in production drainage-impaired, selenium-laced soil in the Westlands Irrigation District, the ‘Darth Vader’ of California water politics,” wrote *Times* reporter Dan Bacher.

Actually, the Westlands Irrigation District

A COURT TEST OF CONSEQUENCE

In an action likely to bring them nose-to-nose with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) as well as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Family Farm Alliance is filing a federal lawsuit demanding that government authorities make use of the best available scientific data in actions to shut down irrigation supplies in California’s Central Valley.

Although the “sound science” demand is aimed at relief for some two million acres of cropland devastated by claims of the NRDC and other groups that irrigation threatens the endangered Delta smelt, the implication of this first proactive legal action will question use of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to restrict agricultural water supplies all over the West.

“This is the first time the Family Farm Alliance has engaged in litigation, and it’s not a step we take lightly,” says Alliance president Pat O’Toole, “but our board unanimously felt other avenues used to advance our Informa-

tion Quality Act [IQA] request had run into dead ends.”

The Alliance filed a request last December under the IQA asking that FWS identify what “best science” was used in eliminating irrigation on the Westside of the San Joaquin Valley, but a series of letters brought nothing more than that FWS had relied on evidence, some of it anecdotal, that the minnow was being depleted around pumping stations.

“There are many, many stressors impacting Delta smelt,” says Alliance executive director Dan Keppen, “but the federal agencies appear to be focused on only one: the water-project pumps. We question the viability of their science and want to see their files associated with the science.”

The federally imposed drought in the Central Valley has put thousands of people out of work and is expected to result just this year in a \$23 million to \$1 billion loss in farm production.—TF

is the largest water district in the nation, generating over \$12 billion in economic production. Its Darth Vader image stems from federal failure to provide promised drainage for the Kesterson Wildlife Refuge in the 1980s. Irrigated farms in the region are limited by law to 960 acres and cover some 600,000 acres.

There is an irony within the irony there in that the large Westlands' growers won't really be stopped or hurt nearly as much as the thousands of farmworkers put out of jobs. In all, the University of California at Davis has reported it expects 25,000 to be unemployed in the valley. Ironically, that is the same number the California Water Project was intended to put to work in the 1930s.



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You can find them now in small towns like Firebaugh and Mendota where there is a village feel as close to Mexico and Latin America as this far north gets. In Mendota, near the high heat of the day, a group of men gather under the awning shade of the Westside Grocery. It used to be a gas station, but now the covered pump bays serve with some cool relief for a couple of guitar players singing in Spanish.

The place is owned and operated by Joseph Riofrio, who grew up here and is now in his sixth term on the Mendota City Council, including a term as mayor. He used to run the business as a small grocery and as a place for the workers, some undocumented, to cash their checks.

"Not many checks anymore," Riofrio says, sadly shaking his head. "People have nowhere to go, nothing to do. Now I rent videos more than I sell any food."

He is a young, strong man, with a no-nonsense approach to customers who he knows face the effects of hard times. The future is deeply troubling. "We have at least 40 percent unemployment now," he says, "and this is just the beginning of the season. The equipment operators, the restaurants, even the car dealer will all be affected as it gets deeper. There's no bailout for us." On a top shelf in his store is the poster he carried in the march to San Luis Reservoir. It says, "Water = Food."

There have been droughts in this region before. Miller and his irrigation canal from the San Joaquin as well as his generosity to new settlers is credited for holding off the crushing effects of one such dry spell at the end of the 19th century. But the most serious similar drought came in the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression and, with yet more irony, it served to create the federal water system that now denies its water to crops in the Westlands. The governor in those days was Sunny Jim Rolph from San Francisco, who saw both the need and the advantage of saving agriculture in the valley. Over objection primarily by the power companies, Rolph issued bonds and accepted a \$49 million contribution of the federal government to build dams, canals and the pumps between the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers in the Delta above where they enter the salt intrusion of San Francisco Bay. In the end, virtually all the \$170 million project was covered by federally financed bonds. The pumping and canal system eventually sending water south down the length of the state would become

They Did Come Back

Interior Secretary Salazar and Gov. Schwarzenegger did come back to the Central Valley before midsummer, each offering smaller town meetings their sincere empathy for the spreading pool of unemployment and despair, and each with vague promises. Schwarzeneg-

Paul Rodriguez led them at the microphone. (Water is our future, water is life.) Rodriguez, a well-known comedian by trade, but a kid from the Valley town of Dinuba by birth, has become the firebrand of this water battle. Cries went up in the crowd, "Rodriguez for governor!"

It's a job Rodriguez says he doesn't want, but then others wonder who really does want it in what is now the tarnished wreckage of the Golden State.

"Others will know about this," Rodriguez said. "They will know about it in their grocery stores and supermarkets; at their tables and in the lunch bags of their kids. It's not just about farmers anymore, and we aren't just

farmers who demand that common sense come back to government. We are a coalition brought together by the one thing that could—WATER!"

Rodriguez has friends in Hollywood and hinted they would join yet more demonstrations aimed directly at members of Congress, especially Rep. George Miller and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, both from California and both of whom

have accused the farmers and farmworkers of being "lawbreakers."

Had it been in Washington, D.C., or San Francisco, the rally might at least have been noted nationally as an agitated crowd of "flat-earthers," or maybe, as it was, the biggest expenditure of CO₂ at one place in the history of Fresno. But, unable even to find the right spin, the Obama-beholden media largely ignored what they have called before, "just a bunch of farmers and their workers." —TF



TIM FINDLEY PHOTOS



ger vowed to seek a state of emergency with President Obama, though it seemed meekly unlikely for the governor of what was once the nation's richest state to be seeking water relief for the heart of its most important industry while California's bills and payrolls and welfare checks were being met with IOUs.

But it mattered less that the political establishment came back than the fact that the workers and the farmers themselves did not leave and were together again. More than 10,000 rallied on the steps of Fresno City Hall July 1. This time, they came not just from the hard-hit barrio towns of Mendota and Firebaugh, but from farming and rural communities all over the state.

"Agua es nuestro futuro, agua es VIDA!"

one of the remarkable engineering achievements of that time when the way out of the Depression was to put people to work building.

Not this time. The 10 percent gesture Schwarzenegger secured from the feds would not arrive until the first crop should already have been in the ground. And out there, in the broken dry fields plowed but few planted, the results were already obvious in the irrigation pipes lying idle, the furrows and turnouts unconnected, and rows of almond groves struggling with mineral-laced well water, or simply standing dead, like squads of skeletons.

More than 300,000 acre-feet of water that was meant for these fields now pours into the Pacific to *save* a little fish that some scientists say won't be and can't be rescued by it. Many of the fish are still lost in the unfiltered pumps themselves, and others may be dying from pollution and sewage added to the water by upstream cities and towns in the Delta itself. The valley strangles while the freshwater mingles wastefully with the salt of the ocean.

That was all said in April by the 10,000 marchers who began their 50-mile walk from Firebaugh. What they got back was the argument that it is a drought—yet in reality not quite the drought they claim. “The federal government created this drought,” say the signposts flashing by as you drive up Interstate 5.

“It’s a judicial drought,” says Jose Ramirez, the city manager of Firebaugh. He looks younger than his 36 years, but even as a child, before he began his determined effort to secure a master’s degree in public administration, Ramirez worked the fields with his family, all the way to Gilroy. He has never seen anything quite like this. “We faced a long dry spell in the 1970s,” he says, “but we were able to get through it. Now, if there weren’t [private] contract water out there for some growers, I’m not sure this city would be a city anymore.”

As in Mendota, unemployment in Firebaugh is now at least 40 percent, and likely to get worse.

“People are not bitter. Not yet,” says Councilman Riofrio, “but most of them know what happened in Klamath, and there’s talk.” In the Klamath Basin of Oregon, when environmental activists succeeded in cutting off irrigation water by a lawsuit claiming it threatened an endangered sucker fish, it was angry townspeople, really, who finally surrounded the pumping station demanding that the water be released.



Dos Palos pump station. More than 300,000 acre-feet of water meant for Central Valley farms just poured into the Pacific last spring to “save” a little fish that some scientists say won’t be and can’t be rescued by it. The valley strangled while the freshwater mingled wastefully with the salt of the ocean.

“It’s that kind of thing,” Riofrio says. “Rural Americans are just not seen as an endangered portion of America. We have to defend ourselves or watch the destruction of rural America.”

But it’s not just rural America at stake. The attack on agriculture ripples quickly and deepens like a flood. At one of the most popular restaurants and fuel stops on I-5, the owner looks over empty tables where he used to see farmers and bankers, truckers and investors meeting at lunch. He asks that we not use his name or that of his restaurant, but he can’t resist saying how he feels. “Last year, it was the price of fuel,” he says. “This year, water costs more than gasoline.” The water and power companies have won what Sunny

Jim Rolph once denied them. Water is no longer served to the few customers unless they specifically ask for it.

Another march to the pumps (see sidebar) can likely draw even more than the 10,000 who walked to the San Luis Reservoir, but it is those who will not march who are part of yet another irony. The United Farm Workers of the late Cesar Chavez refused to join the last march, saying it was payback for the more conservative farmworkers on the Westside not taking part in UFW work stoppages.

That division was formed in the 1960s when El Salvadoran immigrants, many without documents, refused to join the Mexican nationals who comprised most of the UFW.

“Most of them are still here,” Riofrio says grimly. “Still poor, but still here, and not expecting any help from the union.” They say around Mendota that if you get close enough to watch a cow pie-tossing contest, the game is bound to get some on you.

And the pools of trickle-up poverty also reach higher, if more slowly, as people in California and all over the United States begin to feel the cost of choosing a dubiously endangered fish over irrigated fields that once claimed to produce 50 percent of the nation’s food supply. Maybe the North American Free Trade Agreement can cover it from south of the border.

And there’s another irony. ■

Tim Findley trained VISTA volunteers in Colorado’s San Luis Valley in the ’60s (where Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar’s family is from), working with farmers and migrants in the War on Poverty.



The area framed in red used to be California’s best food-producing region.