



U.S. NEWS

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Dying on the Vine

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As another water war rages, the west side of California's storied San Joaquin Valley waits for relief that may not come.

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San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority v. U.S., No. 09-17594 archived on March 29, 2012



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Playing cards and a small wad of dollar bills sit on a pool table at Los Kiki, a dusty pool hall at the end of the main drag in Mendota, Calif. A breeze blows through a broken window, past six men hunched over the table, beer bottles in their hands. It is middle of a Wednesday afternoon. A year ago, they would have been out planting and pruning in the vast fields of grapes, tomatoes, onions, and nut trees that fan out from the city limits. But this year, many of those fields are lying fallow, and the men at Los Kiki are out of work.

"Before, it was good. There were jobs eight months, 10 months out of the year. Now, nothing," says Luis Cortez, 52. Others nod in agreement. Cortez says he has worked just three days all year.

Mendota touts itself as the cantaloupe capital of the world, but its de facto motto is far less optimistic. "No water, no work" is the refrain repeated everywhere here in the western reaches of the San Joaquin Valley. The unemployment rate in this 10,000-person town was an unfathomable 38 percent in July (including



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documented and undocumented workers). Nearly all those who have lost their jobs are farm workers, who often straddle the poverty line even in boom times. The result is a cruel irony: in the region that produces more food than anywhere else in the country, food lines have become regular fixtures, drawing hundreds, sometimes thousands.

After three years of drought, California's legendary water wars are flaring once again, and towns like Mendota, San Joaquin, and Firebaugh are getting a first glimpse of what their future might look like. Farmers blame the area's blight on a "man-made drought" brought on by increasingly strict environmental regulations, but that is only the beginning of the story. There's also the crushing confluence of political negligence, drought, and a century's worth of unbridled growth. Now, as residents wonder if normalcy will ever return, planners are forced to consider a far uglier question: should it? Is a new "normal" required?

That towns like Mendota even exist reflects the extraordinary ambition that built the American West. A century ago, much of the San Joaquin Valley was an undeveloped dust bowl, its few small farming communities clustered around natural water sources. Today, it is a green expanse of agricultural empires. Most of the water that has irrigated these seemingly endless fields comes from northern California, diverted by an epic system of dams and canals born from New Deal funds. It was one of the most ambitious water systems ever built, and the San Joaquin Valley became, in the words of historian Kevin Starr, "the most productive unnatural environment on Earth."

The valley is home to a \$20 billion crop industry; the San Joaquin region alone produces more in farm sales than any other individual state in the country. Mark Borba, 59, has a big stake in that business, just as his grandparents did in the valley's development. Borba Farms started off with about 20 milk cows and 30 acres of land in 1910, at a time when farmers who had tapped an underground aquifer were kicking off a race to cultivate. The farm now covers 10,000 acres, and Mark Borba is only one of 600 growers in the Westlands Water District, a water-contracting group of farmers and landowners on the far west side of the valley where Mendota and other towns sit. By the time Borba took over his family's operation in the 1970s, the valley was already supplying 25 percent of the country's food.

Making that explosive growth possible is access to water delivered through an increasingly byzantine system centered on the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, a thousand-square-mile web of channels, islands, and levees where the two rivers meet before flowing into the San Francisco Bay. From there, giant dams and pumps suck the water southward through veinlike aqueducts to 25 million people and more than 5 million acres of farmland. But not all water consumers are created equally. In fact, access to the water is essentially based on a squatters' rights notion: "First in rights, first in time." In other words, whoever signed up for a water contract first got the best guarantees. Latecomers got junior rights, meaning they'd be the first to get cut in a dry. Westlands, which

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San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, U.S., from 09-17-55, archived on March 29, 2012

has a contract for water delivery with the federal government, is the most junior of the bunch.

It was complicated and costly, but for a long time, the system worked. Over the last three decades, however, the valley's explosive growth has caused rivers to run dry, dead fish to accumulate near the water pumps, and chronic water shortages. The levees near the bay are old, prompting worries that a failure, perhaps following an earthquake, could cause salt water from the bay to rush into the delta, crippling the water supply for the entire state. And the delta smelt, an endangered species of fish no bigger than an index finger, began disappearing as the massive pumps sucked up fish along with the water it was sending south. Lawsuits over the fish filed by environmental groups and water contractors multiplied, and court-imposed restrictions and regulations began siphoning off more and more of the 6 million acre-feet of water exported through the river basin each year.

Most people in the valley blame their water woes on those lawsuits and the fish. Since 1992, when Congress established new federal ecosystem standards, increasing amounts of water have been set aside for wildlife restoration. Since then, Westlands has received on average about half as much water as the 1.2 million acre-feet per year it ordered up in its contract, forcing farmers to rely on expensive pumps that suck up water from the aquifer and water transfers from their better-connected competitors to the east. This year, Westlands is down to nearly nothing, and its farmers are livid. Federal officials slashed the district's allocation to zero at the beginning of the season; only after a furious lobbying campaign did they succeed in bumping it up to 10 percent of the water deliveries stipulated in their contract. A University of California, Berkeley analysis claims that the economic impact of the water reductions on the valley's agricultural production tops \$48 million. That figure will likely get worse once the water agencies begin implementing new rules this summer designed to protect other fish such as sturgeon, salmon, and steelhead trout. In a normal year, such a hit is difficult, salaries says Sarah Woolf, a Westlands District spokeswoman. After three years of natural drought, she says, it's ruinous.

But Barry Nelson, the Natural Resources Defense Council advocate behind the fish lawsuits, says the fish vs. people argument is nonsense. Even after three years of drought, the Central Valley Project (CVP) is still making half of its water deliveries to farms in the valley. Westlands just isn't getting that water. "There's a myth in the valley about the delta smelt, and it's really a tragedy," he says. "I don't mean for a moment to suggest that those small communities on the west side aren't seeing impacts; they are. They're seeing the impact of drought, and those impacts are real and they're hard." Nelson contends that the fish aren't the problem; it's the way the system is set up. Just adjacent to Westlands, he says, four other contractors are getting a full 100 percent of their water allocation this year, despite the drought. And while Westlands has adopted some of the most water-efficient irrigation methods in the business, other farmers in the valley with senior water rights are under no pressure to conserve. The result is a patchwork valley, where a Westlands farmer like Mark Borba is forced to fallow land while his neighbor has excess water that he can sell at a hefty profit. Buying that excess and pumping water from underground is sustainable to a point, says Borba. But the expenses—and the poor quality of the underground water—would drive the business into the ground in the long term.

But that may be all that the Westlands district can hope for. Climate models by the U.S. Global Change Research Program, the state's water resources agency, and researchers at the University of California, Davis all point to the same trend: the Sierra snowcaps that supply the state's water are disappearing. If that's the case, farmers should expect droughts more frequently, and

San Luis & Delta Mendota, salaries, Authentic U.S. No. 99-17594 retrieved on March 29, 2012

Westlands may have to come around to the notion that they will never receive all the water that their contracts call for. "No drought comes to you with a label that says, 'Brought to you by climate change,' " says Nelson. "But in the American Southwest and in California, we should be prepared for a drier future."

To at least a few teams of researchers, ending the conversation with a doomsday prediction for agriculture on the west side of the valley is insufficient. Like the farmers and engineers who, a century ago, looked at the desert and imagined farms, these teams, which pull together researchers at federal and state agencies, California universities, and think tanks into a planning group called the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), say a good plan and some new hardware is all the valley needs to conquer its water challenge. They are likely to suggest building a new "peripheral" canal that would transport northern water around the delta, rather than through it, to restore its battered ecosystem.

To farmers like Borba, that's the kind of investment worth making. "I've traveled all over the world—Egypt, Australia, Brazil, China—and I've never seen an agricultural resource like we have in the San Joaquin Valley. The soils, the climate, the crop variability. We've got 300 crops we can grow here. You can't find that just anywhere," he says. "So I have a hard time saying, for lack of the will, that we should neuter the most productive agricultural resource in the world. I don't think that's where America wants to go."

North of the valley, where the canal would be built, not everyone is so enthusiastic. Opponents, who beat back the idea in a 1982 referendum, see it as a destructive, expensive water grab by southern users. They have a point; according to the BDCP and the federal Bureau of Reclamation, preliminary construction-cost estimates for the two biggest projects under consideration are \$13 billion, a price tag California is hardly in a position to bear in its present state. Other critics, like Nelson, say the drop in water supply caused by climate change would render such mega-investments moot. The better bet, they argue, is an aggressive push for water-conservation standards. Yet others, like the University of the Pacific's Jeffrey Michael, who does business forecasting, note that the issues facing Westlands are hardly valley-wide problems. Rather, he says, farm employment this year has actually gone up, making it one of the few success stories in a region pummeled by the mortgage crisis. Still, support for the idea might be building steam. The BDCP has missed benchmarks, but there's evidence the governor's office is behind the idea. State officials recently announced they intend to start preliminary drilling for ground tests this month, while state lawmakers recently unveiled five new major water bills focused on the delta.

Even if that comes through, though, there's no guarantee all of Westlands would reap the benefits. As productive as the farms in the district have been, bad drainage underneath means the soil fills up with salt, boron, selenium, and other minerals—toxins that make plants shrivel just as quickly as a drought. A drainage system could address the problem, but, again, nobody seems to want to pay for one. Instead, starting in 2000, Westlands and the Bureau of Reclamation negotiated a deal to permanently retire from farming 100,000 acres of land in the district in return for compensation from the federal government. "There's a reason some of the land in Westlands was the last land in California to be irrigated," says Nelson, the NRDC analyst. "The land that was retired a few years ago has already salted up. It looks like it snowed." That might be just the beginning; federal agencies estimate the number should be two to four times that amount.

All of this leaves the valley's west side caught in a painful limbo until California answers big questions about where and how it wants to make use of its

resources. In the meantime, some economic planners are eyeing the area as a potential clean energy source where almond farms could be transformed into solar farms. Those plans, too, are preliminary. "It took a century of bad decisions to get us here. The good news is, we are on the verge of making some major changes on what we're going to do about it," says Jeff Mount, a water-geology researcher at UC Davis who supports the peripheral canal proposal. "So, yes, the valley's farm economy itself is probably going to shrink some. But that may not be a bad thing in the long run. And it may be an inevitable thing."

Such talk makes 34-year-old Dora Chavarria wonder about her future. She was born in Mendota, the daughter of a field worker who arrived there 38 years ago, worked the fields, and saved enough money to open up an auto shop. She's climbed the social ladder yet another rung, working at a program for immigrant families in the Firebaugh school system. Chavarria recalls a time when she could be proud of Mendota; when people filled the streets, when her father would drive her around in trucks filled with tomatoes from the surrounding fields, when musical acts would pass through town, and when the melon-capital claim rang true. It's been a long time since that was the case; for more than a decade, the streets have been empty and dangerous, she says, and getting worse as people head for Las Vegas and Los Angeles in search of work. Chavarria doesn't let her children out alone, and now her husband wants to leave, too.

To keep the town alive, Mendota's leaders have, in their own way, started to think about alternatives to agriculture. Mayor Robert Silva says the best bet is the federal prison under construction on the outskirts of town, a project he courted, thinking it will spark an economic revival as hotels and restaurants spring up to accommodate prison visitors. As the town waits to see if Silva's development predictions come true, residents face a crushing tide. This summer, the town's only bank announced it was shutting down because of insufficient deposits. As the public schools lose students, officials worry funding cuts will follow. Most eerily, around the outskirts of town, billboards and flags advertise the empty, unfinished development of single-family homes with bright green lawns, constant reminders that, on more than one front, foresight has been hard to come by in the valley.

Still, Chavarria is not ready to give up on Mendota just yet. "It's just slowly dying, and we can't let that happen. This is my heritage," she says. "Change is good, and hopefully something better comes along. But if we don't stay here to make that change, then the change is never going to happen."

Learn more about the troubled in NEWSWEEK's Special Report: "[The Valley of Shadows](#)."

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