

Paul Betancourt: Mr. President, it's not just about drought

Fresno

February 12, 2014

An open letter to President Barack Obama:

First, Mr. President, thank you for coming to the San Joaquin Valley. This is important to us, and to all Californians. There is nothing like having leaders out in the field seeing things for themselves.

Mr. President, this is a multi-year problem that requires multi-year solutions.

We have been short of rain for a few years. It is catching everyone's attention right now because it is affecting our cities, not just our farmers.

This is a political problem, not a technical problem.

When President Theodore Roosevelt led in the creation of western irrigation projects, he said the purpose of these projects was, "reclaiming the waste areas of the arid West ... and creating new homes upon the land."

Our predecessors built a system to take care of our water needs and we have mismanaged it. President John F. Kennedy was here for the groundbreaking of the San Luis Reservoir dam and reservoir on a typically hot August day in 1962. He spoke of how important this project was for the citizens of the Valley, and especially for the people on the Valley's west side.

Now that reservoir is being squeezed off by the federal government.

If you want to know why we are suspicious of the federal government you only have to look as far back as the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) that was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush in 1992.

The CVPIA took water from the irrigation system for the environment and promised to restore the capacity to the system within 10 years.

More than 20 years later, we are still waiting.

The 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics went to Amartya Sen who proved that famines were caused by governments, not by natural disasters. Sen wrote, "Droughts may not be avoidable, but their affects can be."

There are wet years and there are dry years in California.

We are foolish because we do not save water from the wet years for the dry years. In 2009, we cut off water and the University of California reported that 60,000 people lost their jobs.

A few years ago, we had 160% of normal rainfall. Farmers only got 80% of their water supply and 27 million acre feet of water ran out into the Pacific Ocean. Imagine what we could have done if we had saved even 10% of that water.

Your administration is concerned about climate change. One way to lower our carbon footprint is to grow food near where it is consumed. There are more than 30 million consumers within a few hundred miles of Central Valley farms.

Help us secure our long-term water supplies and we can help millions of people lower their carbon footprints by growing healthy and affordable food here in California. But, we need a reliable water supply.

This drought is a multi-year problem that will require multi-year solutions. In my book, "Ten Reasons: Finding Balance On Environmental Issues," I make the case that we need a healthy environment and a healthy economy.

Yes, let's care for the environment. But, let's feed and clothe our people, too. We must manage our system so we can capture more rainfall during the wet years for the dry years.

Cordially,

Paul H. Betancourt

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Paul H. Betancourt is a farmer and a past president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/12/3766403/mr-president-its-not-just-about.html#storylink=cpy>