

# Viewpoints: What Obama should see on his visit to Fresno

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Over a mirror in a beer bar in my hometown, Oildale, hung a sign: “We don’t care how they do it in L.A.” It revealed a truth in that little [San Joaquin](#) Valley hamlet, because folks really didn’t care. Just north in Fresno, President Barack Obama will be entering a part of California today that plays by its own rules and expectations – [Los Angeles](#) and [San Francisco](#) (and maybe Sacramento) be damned.

The view in the state’s midsection is that the coastal communities are mere ornaments. Local folks are tough, contrary and certainly self-serving, but also kind, generous and innovative in equal turns. They are not easily impressed.

The region has long been the butt of regional denigration (“hotter ’n Hades with the blowers on!”), but it is also the place that has given the world [Audra McDonald](#) and [Merle Haggard](#) ... and, for those with long memories, [Earl Warren](#) (as in the old “Impeach [Earl Warren](#)” signs along [Highway 99](#)).

Agribusiness in the Central Valley plays by its own rules, too. In this drought year, it remains credited with having demonstrated the efficiency of industrial farming. To do that, nature itself had to be rehabilitated. In 1863, William Henry Brewer said of the dry [San Joaquin Valley](#), “no water, no food.” Variations of that same sentiment, printed on signs attached, ironically enough, to cotton trailers, will greet Obama if he ventures onto Interstate 5 west of Fresno.

Gazing at the foot of the brown western Fresno County foothills, the president can glimpse how the Valley’s abundant west side might look without a sophisticated water supply system that has favored agribusiness over residential users and environmental concerns.

If one were listing wonders of the modern world, California’s irrigation complex should be among them. Big ag has benefited mightily from that, so when maimed rivers such as the San Joaquin just north of Fresno are granted some [water rights](#), clichés like “Don’t put fish over farm families!” are broken out, often by corporate growers who don’t live near farms, as though fishing and tourism support no families.

Water storage and transfer have historically led to ever-larger, ever-more-complex containment and distribution systems such as the [Central Valley Project](#) and the California Water Project that, in turn, have fueled agribusiness. As a result, growers expect their water, while consumers expect abundant, cheap produce. Those lead to a repeated threat: “Give us our water or you’ll pay much more for food.”

Irrigation has in a cluster of four adjacent counties – Fresno, Tulare, Kings and Kern – helped create the richest agricultural realm in the nation. They are, however, peculiarly Californian economic engines since they, in turn, are the sites of seven or eight (it varies from year to year) of the 10 poorest communities in the state, all populated largely by Latino farm laborers.

Three of the five worst metropolitan areas in terms of population below the [poverty line](#) are also found in the Valley – Fresno, Modesto and Delano-Bakersfield – along with much wealth concentrated in few hands. Gated communities sprout and economic segregation increases.

Poverty and poor public health remain intimately linked in the San Joaquin, but Obama’s handlers will likely make certain the president doesn’t see the bloated bellies and hopeless eyes there. The president may not learn that some of the small towns inhabited largely by farm laborers seem to have become little more than engines for the production of generations of peons. Although Latinos increasingly control local politics in those communities, racism has until recently been tolerated, and larger communities such as Bakersfield, Fresno and Corcoran have histories of de facto segregation.

It is understandable that the chief executive would wish to concentrate on drought and irrigation. Water fuels not only farming here, but all human settlement ... and nature itself. The social, economic and environmental consequences of [population growth](#) in the San Joaquin have brought the region some attention, although it still lags other areas – a New York editor once called it “a remote California valley.” As the primary setting for two of California’s economic engines – agribusiness and petroleum – it can no longer be trivialized.

Obama is a city guy, but when he drives by the “New Dust Bowl – Created by Congress” signs, one hopes he’ll realize that most of the expanse of greenery he sees in the Valley has also been created by Congress (or other governmental bodies) providing water and various subsidies, and that the shortage being proclaimed today is a shortage of expectation, not of absolute need.

Finally, the president might ask how more water will help abate the endemic culture of poverty and lack of opportunity that is the San Joaquin Valley’s least-discussed crop. The region is both a best and a worst component of California, and certainly is not an unimportant one.

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