

Four Reasons Why Google Loves The San Joaquin Valley

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It's around 150 miles from Silicon Valley to Fresno, but over the last few years, Mountain View-based Google has quietly been increasing its presence in the San Joaquin Valley. In fact, the region that's known for its raisins and almonds is now home to some of Google's top research and development projects.

Earlier today the company's secretive "Google Barge" [arrived at the Port of Stockton](#), its new home. The mysterious barge [began life last fall](#) at Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, but the lack of permits eventually halted construction on the shipping container derived project. Speculation about just what the company was up to with the 250 foot-long vessel set the internet abuzz last year, with some speculating the ship could be a new floating data center, or a top secret R&D lab. While the specific function of the barge is still not clear, the company [told the Washington Post last year](#) that it is "exploring using the barge as an interactive space where people can learn about new technology."

It's not the only Google project in the area. A few months ago the company [signed a lease agreement](#) with Merced County for 60 acres at the former Castle Air Force Base in Atwater, now known as the Castle Commerce Center. The company plans to use the facility to test out its [self-driving car project](#). The Merced Sun Star reports that Google will have around 10 to 15 employees working on the project at base.

Another Google research project also strong ties to the San Joaquin Valley. Last August the company announced that [it chose the Fresno area](#) to test its internet-by-balloon technology known as [Project Loon](#). After an initial test session in New Zealand, the tech giant brought its team to the Central Valley to evaluate the Project Loon radio systems over Fresno.

So why is Google using the San Joaquin Valley as a testing ground for some of its biggest research projects? The company has offered a few clues:



Google tested its "Project Loon" balloon-based internet technology in Fresno last year.
Credit Google / <https://plus.google.com/u/0/+ProjectLoon/posts>

1) Proximity

While the Central Valley may be worlds away from Silicon Valley culturally and economically, the relative proximity of cities like Stockton, Atwater and Fresno to Mountain View is appealing to the company. Here's what Google had to say about selecting Fresno for the Project Loon test:

The Central Valley is a great location for Loon's research flights because it is close to Google's Mountain View headquarters, yet removed from dense populations and air traffic. There are favorable weather and wind conditions and it is mostly flat farmland, which allows us to track and follow the balloons quite easily.

2) We're less picky about things

When Google's barge was in San Francisco Bay, it not only sparked speculation on Twitter and Facebook, it also [drew scrutiny](#) from agencies like the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission. The lack of proper permits ultimately led the company to relocate the barge to Stockton. With communities in the recession-wracked Central Valley still struggling to boost job creation, the presence of a company like Google is huge, even if the project itself isn't a big job creator.

3) Keep it quiet

Companies like Google like to keep their R&D projects to themselves. Despite its now-famous corporate mantra of "Don't Be Evil," Google isn't all that different other tech giants like Apple and Facebook when it comes to testing out new projects. Just look at the secrecy surrounding "Google Barge." By basing a project in Merced County or San Joaquin County, the company is able to keep a slightly lower profile than it would on the shores of San Francisco Bay.

4) Wide open spaces

When it comes to building self-driving cars or testing high flying balloons, the flat expanses of the Central Valley make it the perfect place spread out and collect data. And while a company

like Google isn't likely to pinch pennies when it comes to real estate costs, renting a 60 acre space in Merced County is far cheaper than doing the same in the Bay Area.

Not so fast

However, this isn't to say Google is head-over-heels in love with the Central Valley. After all, just ask the people of Fresno. Back in 2010, the city staged an [elaborate social media campaign](#) to get the company to select the city as the test market for its ultra-high speed internet project Google Fiber. Ultimately the effort was in vain, the company chose Kansas City as its first test market.