

House panel meeting in Fresno hears emotional impact of drought

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Kern County farmer Larry Starrh speaks during the hearing. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

Larry Starrh's voice choked with emotion Wednesday as he told congressional members of his family's decision to dry up 1,000 acres of almonds this year and let the trees die due to water shortages.

"Shortages that were created and controlled by regulations that have been imposed and brandished like weapons," the Kern County farmer said. "Sadly, in the real world, water is about power, water is a weapon, water is a hostage."

Starrh was one of nine witnesses at a loud House Natural Resources Committee field hearing on California's water crisis convened in the Fresno City Council chambers. He echoed the thoughts of many in the audience about environmental regulations that curb farm water deliveries.

Before the meeting, several hundred people joined a loud rally on the City Hall steps asking for changes in federal environmental laws and construction of new reservoirs, such as Temperance Flat on the San Joaquin River.

Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, requested Wednesday's hearing on his water reform legislation calling for dams and repeal of the San Joaquin River restoration.

The bill passed the Republican-controlled House, but appears stymied as the Senate, led by Democrats, looks at a different proposal. The Senate bill offers \$300 million in funding through various programs during the drought.

The Senate has not acted on Valadao's bill, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley Water Reliability Act. Several House members said it is important for the Senate to join the discussion now.

The bills come at a time when California faces a third year of a drought and one of the driest years on record. Thousands of farmers may be shut out of irrigation water deliveries from either the federal or state water projects -- for the first time on record.

Many San Joaquin Valley farmers rely heavily on Northern California river water sent through the troubled Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which has several fish protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Though Valadao's bill does not address the Endangered Species Act, farmers could not pass up the opportunity to discuss their frustration with it.

Starrh and many others said ESA protections -- namely, pumping restrictions -- for those fish created much of the problem, leaving farmers with little choice but to drill new wells and pump ground water.

"Some farmers are buying their own drilling rigs, yet water is being released to the ocean for the environment," Valadao said.

Environmental and fishery groups were not on the witness list Wednesday. But they have been arguing that the lack of water this year is due to extreme drought in California, not releases for fish, such as the threatened delta smelt.

Farmers on Wednesday had other ideas. Some told the panel of eight congressional members that they suspect government agencies and environmental groups are using the Northern California river water to flush out the delta and the San Francisco Bay.

Farmer George Delgado, based in Firebaugh, said, "The water is being taken from us to dilute the pollution."

Others at the field hearing emphasized the impacts on the Valley. Sylvia Chavez, mayor of the southwestern Fresno County city of Huron, said unemployment and crime rise during water shortages. This year, the problems will be much worse, she said.

Chavez said people all over the globe benefit from the farmworkers who live in Huron, population 7,000.

"Remember," she said, "it is communities like Huron, California, that feed the world."

Merced County farmer Kole Upton added that cities, industries and farms are held accountable for the water they use, but environmental efforts are not. He said chronic environmental water cutbacks are undermining the Valley economy and a way of life.

"If feel like my farm and my family are under attack by my own government," he said.

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