

# Valley congressional districts among highest concentrations of low-income earners

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By Tim Sheehan

A farmworker, checking the drip irrigation system for tangelos, at left, walks next to green beans, center on Friday, May 31, 2013 near Orosi.



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Two congressional districts in the central San Joaquin Valley are among the five U.S. districts with the highest concentration of low-wage workers in greatest need of an increase to the minimum wage, a humanitarian and social advocacy organization reported.



In a study on the working poor in America, Oxfam America concluded that almost 30% of workers in the Valley's 21st Congressional District — encompassing all of Kings County and parts of Fresno, Tulare and Kern counties — would benefit from a proposal in Congress to boost the federal minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour.

That share, which amounts to about 67,000 people, ranks the district represented by Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, third among the nation's 435 congressional districts.

The neighboring 16th Congressional District represented by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, is fifth on the list at 29.1%, or about 64,000 workers whose earnings would rise from a minimum-wage hike.

The district includes Merced County and parts of Fresno and Madera counties.

California's current minimum wage of \$8 per hour has been in place since 2008, and will rise to \$9 per hour on July 1. It will go up again to \$10 per hour on Jan. 1, 2016.

But the federal minimum wage has been at \$7.25 per hour for seven years.

Legislation in Congress proposes to boost the minimum wage in stages — first to \$8.20 shortly after passage of the bill, then to \$9.15 after one year, and to \$10.10 after two years. After that, it would rise each year based on increases to the Consumer Price Index.

Raymond Offenheiser, president of Boston-based Oxfam America, said an increase to the federal minimum wage is long overdue, "bogged down in partisan politics that are really doing little to serve our country."

"There are large numbers of low-wage workers in literally the congressional districts of every single congressman or congresswoman across the country, and the average is pretty consistent whether they're Democratic or Republican," Offenheiser said last week in a teleconference with reporters.

The average share of low-wage earners across all districts in the U.S., he added, is about 19%, or 40,000 workers.

The Oxfam figures represent an estimate of low-wage workers who earn between \$7.25 and \$11.50 per hour — "the range likely to be affected by an increase in the federal minimum wage to \$10.10," the organization reported.

By presenting information that is broken down by congressional districts, Offenheiser said, "I think it presents an interesting question and challenge to voters in those districts and the legislators in those districts."

Four of the five congressional districts in the San Joaquin Valley, for instance, have higher proportions of low-wage workers than the national average.

Valadao, whose district is tops on the Valley list and the second in California, said he opposes raising the federal minimum wage.

"Forcing a higher wage on small businesses hurts consumers while preventing job creators from expanding," he said last week.

Valadao cited a 2013 study by the conservative Heritage Foundation that "showed increasing the minimum wage to \$10.10 would 'likely eliminate 300,000 jobs per year and reduce gross domestic product by over \$40 billion annually.' "

"We should instead focus on getting government out of the way so businesses can create new, higher-wage jobs," he added.

Costa, whose district is not far behind Valadao's on the low-wage scale, is one of the co-sponsors of the House minimum-wage bill, HR 1010.

"The minimum wage has not been increased since President George W. Bush was in office," he said. "It is very difficult, if not impossible, to support a family on the minimum wage. Hard-working families who are earning the minimum wage deserve an increase."

Costa added that families in Valley districts with some of the highest low-wage concentrations in the nation "are counting on Congress to act."

The release of the report marks the start of a full-court press by Oxfam — the American branch of an organization founded in England in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief — to break a partisan logjam over the bill.

"Even in a divided Congress, there is still bipartisan support for this," Offenheiser said. "Our hope that by making this data available, we can help push Congress to do the right thing."

Offenheiser said low-wage families rely on federal assistance amounting to about \$243 billion a year "just to make ends meet." Putting more money into their pockets would not only reduce that burden, he said, but also improve their buying power and "inject about \$32.6 billion into the U.S. economy."

In both Valadao's and Costa's districts, more than 50% of working households are living below 200% of the national poverty level, Oxfam estimated, compared to the U.S. average of about 27%. About 23% of working families in Valadao's district, and 27% in Costa's district, receive food stamps compared to the national average of 13.4%.

Zeynep Ton, a professor with the Sloan School of Management at MIT, said in the Oxfam teleconference that her 15 years of research in the retail industry suggests that rather than being hurt, businesses are more likely to benefit from paying higher wages to workers.

"Most companies don't realize that bad jobs with very low wages cost them a lot more," she said. "Bad jobs with low wages are a vicious cycle. Bad jobs lead to poor operations, which creates a lot of problems (including poor customer service) that lead to lower sales and lower profits."

When a business sees revenue fall, "that leads to shrinking labor budgets ... and, of course, that means companies cannot invest in their people, so the cycle begins again."

Ton said that in sectors ranging from grocers to warehouse stores to convenience stores where low wages are typical, she has studied companies that offer better jobs with higher wages, more training, stable schedules, "and they're able to offer their customers low prices and good service, and they are producing great returns for their shareholders."

## THE VALLEY PICTURE

Numbers and proportions of low-wage workers in San Joaquin Valley congressional districts who would benefit from a proposed increase of the minimum wage to \$10.10 per hour:

**21st District (Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford), Kings County and parts of Fresno, Kern & Tulare counties:** 67,000 low-wage earners, 29.7% of all workers (ranked third of 435 congressional districts nationwide).

**16th District (Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno), Merced County and parts of Madera and Fresno counties:** 64,000, 29.1% (ranked fifth of 435 districts).

**22nd District (Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare), parts of Tulare and Fresno counties:** 57,000, 21.7% (ranked 133rd of 435 districts).

**23rd District (Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield), parts of Kern, Tulare and Los Angeles counties:** 50,000, 20.2% (ranked 194th of 435 districts).

**4th District (Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove), Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, El Dorado, Mariposa and Tuolumne counties and parts of Fresno, Madera, Nevada and Placer counties:** 39,000, 14.9% (356th of 435 districts).

## NATIONWIDE COMPARISON

View an [interactive map](#) that shows information on low-wage earners for each congressional district in the U.S.

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