

# Joe Matthews: The Year of the San Joaquin Valley

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Joe Matthews

It's not clear if Gov. Jerry Brown and his challenger Neel Kashkari will debate each other this fall. But if they do, there should be no doubt about the proper location: the San Joaquin Valley.

In this very quiet California election year, our state's most overlooked region has emerged as the center of every single major debate about California's future. As we fight over high-speed rail and water and prisons and fracking and unemployment, we are really debating the future of the San Joaquin.

The San Joaquin — the southern Central Valley stretching from the delta to the Tehachapi Mountains — only looks small compared with the rest of California. With 4 million residents across eight counties, its population is as big as Oregon's — and bigger than that of 24 states (Nevada, Oklahoma, Iowa and Connecticut among them). In square miles, it's larger than Maryland or Massachusetts. And for all the talk about the power of the San Joaquin's agriculture, most of its people live in cities. Fresno has more people than the cities of Atlanta or Miami.

And the San Joaquin's problems may be even bigger than the place itself. So now, without quite realizing it, we are having different policy debates that turn on the same question: Just how much does the rest of California want to do for the San Joaquin?

This is the real question of high-speed rail, even though it's obscured by debates over the project's cost and whether it will ever get people from Los Angeles to San Francisco in less than three hours. High-speed rail is less about connecting north to south — and more about connecting the San Joaquin, where rail construction is to begin, to our coastal mega-cities, and boosting the San Joaquin economy by attracting new people and jobs to the region. That's why so many California leaders are still backing the train despite the collapse of public support for it.

The water debate has a similar cast. Yes, California's water issues are statewide, but the drought is being felt most strongly by San Joaquin farmers who remain heavy users of water, and need the steady supply promised by the water bond measure and the proposed tunnels to bring water south under the delta.

Debates over prisons (the San Joaquin has more than its share of crime and correctional facilities), fracking of natural gas (much of Monterey Shale sits under the San Joaquin), and immigration (Bakersfield is home to U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who is blocking reform) are especially hot here. And when people talk about the lack of jobs in California, they are really talking about the San Joaquin, where unemployment remains in double digits even as the state experiences economic recovery.

The bad news is that all six of these San Joaquin-centric policy fights — high-speed rail, water, fracking, prisons, immigration, jobs — are complicated and could end in stalemates. The good news is that each of these debates, when grounded in the particulars of the region, could scramble our predictable politics and inspire creative compromises.

It's good that both major parties are divided by these San Joaquin debates. Gov. Brown has stood up for the San Joaquin by backing high-speed rail in the face of criticism from other Democrats, including his lieutenant governor. He's also drawing protests from within his own party because of his support for water infrastructure and his refusal to ban fracking. Kashkari, the Republican gubernatorial candidate from coastal Orange County, is playing both sides of the San Joaquin divide. On one hand, he's made poverty

central to his platform, including specific language for combating it in the San Joaquin. On the other, he's calling for the demise of high-speed rail (Ozzy Osbourne's "Crazy Train" has become his theme song).

This multi-issue debate over the San Joaquin may provide a solution to a basic problem facing California this year: the total absence of public interest in an election lacking any overarching narrative, or clear stakes. The candidates are all familiarly boring or boringly unfamiliar. But the San Joaquin is not a boring place; it's worth fighting for. Yes, it's already July, but it's not too late to start calling 2014 the Year of the San Joaquin.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square ([www.zocalopublicsquare.org](http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org)).