

Drought drying up small Central Valley farmers' future

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By Robert Rodriguez

This time of year, May Vu's farm in Sanger should be carpeted with blooming flowers and a bounty of vegetables. But a failing irrigation pump and a nearly empty well have dried up Vu's farm and with it, her source of income.

The 58-year-old Vu knows she is up against major obstacles as California struggles through one of the worst droughts in its history.

Still, she carefully walks the trellised rows, hunting for vegetables to harvest. The summer heat and lack of water have shriveled her crop of bitter melon, turning the Asian vegetables from a bright green to a yellow-orange color.

"This is not what it should look like," Vu says, plucking the vegetable and tossing it on the ground. "You get no money for this, no money."

Across the state, the drought has put tremendous pressure on large and small farmers such as Vu, who increasingly are relying on ground water to sustain crops. The spike in ground water use has caused water levels to drop below the reach of irrigation pumps.

"We are in our third dry year and with little surface water, ag, cities and rural residents are all drawing from the same water table, and that water table is dropping," said Gary Serrato, general manager of the Fresno Irrigation District. "And as it continues to drop, wells are going dry."

Agriculture officials and small farm advocates are not sure how many farmers in the San Joaquin Valley are without or have very little water. The Fresno-based National Hmong American Farmers estimates that at least 30 farmers have called their office seeking help.

"People are pumping, but all they are getting is sand," said Chukou Thao, executive director the National Hmong American Farmers. "There are a lot of people who are feeling very stressed right now and we are very concerned."

Adding to the farmers' problems is the backlog of requests for new wells.

Vu said she was told that it would cost at least \$8,000 to deepen her 60-foot well and fix her pump. But even if she could afford it, the well company couldn't get to her for at least six months, if not, longer.

Kim Hammond, a co-owner at Arthur & Orum Well Drilling in Fresno, said her customers have at least a one year wait for a new well.

"We have a lot of desperate people calling up, some women are even crying on the phone," Hammond said. "But we can only do so much. We are already running some of our crews 24 hours a day."

Hammond recommends that those in need of a new well put their names on as many lists as possible.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also has some financial help available, but it will take some time to receive it. The USDA's micro loan program offers farmers up to \$35,000. But the program takes at least 30 days to process the loan.

So far, about two dozen farmers have applied for micro loans at offices of the Fresno County Farm Service Agency.

"We know there are wells going dry all over the Valley and we have had lots of different farmers contacting us," said Russ Friend, executive director of the Fresno County Farm Service Agency office. "But even if we could get the money to farmers tomorrow, they may have to wait until January to get a new well."

Vu has applied for the loan, in hopes of trying to salvage the rest of her season. She also is debating whether to find a new piece of property and start all over. Her three-year lease on the 11-acre Sanger farm is up next year. She shares the farm with two other families.

For now, with her pump pulling out just a fraction of the water it normally provides, she is doing what she can to keep her plants alive. She has seen a severe drop in production. Instead of 125 boxes of vegetables a week, she is harvesting about two boxes a week. She estimates she has lost thousands of dollars in sales.

Her flower garden succumbed to the dry conditions about two weeks ago.

A field that once was blanketed with lilies, daisies, tulips, dahlias, sunflowers, carnations and peonies is dry. Stubborn weeds have taken over, choking out what few flowers remained.

Vu, known for her flowers, sold them at several farmers markets including Hanford, Clovis and Fresno. She grows them in honor of her husband who died in 2006.

"The flowers always made me feel happy," Vu said. "But now, there isn't a lot to be happy about."

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