

Westlands deal may end long dispute over contaminated land

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JOHN WALKER/THE FRESNO BEE West-side farmer John Diener talks about an ally he may have found in a fight to save tainted cropland- the Optunia cactus, also known as nopales or paddle cactus, in his plot at Five Points. The plant can take salty water and sucks up natural enemies of fertile soil, such as selenium and boron. A federal plant researcher has been working with Diener to see if the idea will work. John Walker/The Fresno Bee Five Points, CA 1-27-2012 JOHN WALKER — Fresno Bee Staff Photo | [Buy Photo](#)

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[Westlands Water District](#) says it has reached a deal with the federal government in a decades-long dispute over thousands of acres of contaminated land.

The San Francisco Chronicle on Sunday reported the agreement involving Westlands, which covers 1,000 square miles of some of the country's most lucrative farmland. The 600 farms in the water district on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley produce \$1 billion in crops annually.

The agreement concerns a bungled, congressionally approved 1960s irrigation project that contaminated at least 100,000 acres of the Central Valley with selenium, salt and boron. In the 1980s, the buildup of minerals caused deaths and birth defects in thousands of fish and birds.

The new agreement, contained in a short public document crafted by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the



Westlands Water District, says the Westlands Water District would handle the drainage problem that led to the mineral buildup. Taxpayers would be relieved of the estimated \$2.7 billion cost of removing contaminated water.

The federal government, in turn, would forgive \$342 million in federal debt owed by the water district.

Members of Congress still would have to approve the proposed agreement.

Congress agreed in 1960 to bring water to the area with the promise that the government would build a drain for the minerals that leach from the soil. The drain was only partly built, stopping at Kesterson Reservoir in Merced County.

Westlands drainage issues were the focus of the 1980s environmental disaster at Kesterson, where selenium-laced irrigation runoff from Westlands was directed.

At the time, nobody understood what high concentrations of selenium would do to wildlife. At Kesterson, shorebirds were left dead or deformed, and all kinds of wildlife was broadly destroyed.

Kesterson was hastily closed down, but the west-side drainage problem hasn't gone away. Like many places on the globe, there are areas where the tainted irrigation drainage won't drain away.

It's trapped on shallow layers of clay that prevent the water from draining lower into the underground. The tainted water builds up toward root zones of crops, eventually poisoning the land.

Westlands and other districts are entitled to drainage from the federal Central Valley Project, a federal court has ruled in a long-running lawsuit.

Critics say Westlands is in the wrong place and should never have been irrigated. Farmers and their allies said the drainage problem is vastly overstated and that promising new technology will solve the rest. Some have experimented with new technology or plants that tolerate or even absorb selenium.

The Fresno Bee contributed to this report.

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