

Valley leaders urge Brown to release more Delta water for local livelihoods

By Tim Sheehan



Mendota Mayor Robert Silva, pictured here at a legislative hearing in 2008 on drought issues, spoke out at a water rally Thursday in Selma about the harsh effect the four-year drought is having on farmworkers: "When you cut off water to farmers on the west side and they get a zero allocation, that means less jobs, and this is what's happened. This is the tragic thing that's happening in our community. This is unreal and this is unacceptable."

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SELMA — A plea for water

- *Valley leaders issue another plea to Gov. Jerry Brown and state legislators to allow more Northern California water to be pumped into the region through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.*
- *Water shortages are causing farmers to idle acreage, laying off farmworkers and potentially creating shortages of food crops that are shipped across the state and nation.*

• *A greater reliance on pumping water from underground is causing water tables to diminish and drying up wells used by communities and rural families.*

In another of an ongoing series of pleas by elected leaders in the Valley, representatives of farming communities in Fresno and Tulare counties gathered Thursday in Selma and challenged Gov. Jerry Brown to do more to relieve the effects of drought on farms and families in the region.

Their top demand is for the state to allow more Northern California water to be pumped through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and into San Joaquin Valley canal systems. Some fear that the need for more water transfers may not be understood in metropolitan regions of the state until the pinch in agricultural production makes some commodities scarce or more expensive for urban consumers.

“Because of the shortage of water and the lack of acreage being planted, every consumer in the state of California and abroad is going to suffer the consequences,” Mendota Mayor Robert Silva said. “Tomatoes, lettuce and things like that are going to be affected (because) the less product you have, it brings the price up.”

Leaders said they’re grateful for a \$1 billion drought relief package that Brown signed into law last week. It included money for emergency food and water for stricken Valley towns where a lack of water has idled farmland — and farmworkers. “The funding for food and drinking water relief is appreciated,” Selma Mayor Scott Robertson said.

But, he and others added, it’s not enough. “Today our families and neighbors need water,” Robertson said.

“In the drought legislation approved last week, almost two-thirds of the funding is for flood control projects that will result in no water here” in Central California, Robertson added. “Other funding for valuable recycled-water projects is going to Southern California, not to this Valley ... In the Valley, water is a health issue, it’s an economic issue, and it’s an urgent issue.”

Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes said Brown has the authority as governor to declare an emergency and change Delta pumping regulations. “But he has failed to do it, and that’s the problem,” Mendes said, his voice rising in volume. “The governor sat there and did nothing, nothing.”

Tulare County Supervisor Allen Ishida said the lack of water deliveries to the Valley’s east side is taking a severe toll on agriculture and families, not only because of a lack of canal water for irrigation but also to recharge the underground water table.

“Since the drought started, we’ve had 1,000 domestic well failures in Tulare County, and most of those are on the east side of the county,” Ishida said. He called for a low-interest loan program to help families replace their dry wells rather than having to rely on the county to provide emergency water year after year. “There’s no quality of life when you can’t take a shower or flush a toilet,” he added.

The water shortage is also threatening the long-term health of about 50,000 acres of citrus groves that typically receive water from Millerton Lake via the Friant-Kern Canal. “Those 50,000 acres mean many jobs,” Ishida said. “There is a way to help, and that is for the Bureau of Reclamation to allow flows from Millerton Lake through Terra Bella so we can add ground water into the system to keep our trees alive.”

If groves of oranges, lemons and other permanent tree crops die for lack of water, “we’re looking at impacts that last many, many years,” he added. “It’s not just this year or next year. It takes about seven years to get back into production. That’s lost income, lost jobs and lost livelihoods for the people in this industry.”

The situation is just as desperate on the Valley’s west side, Fresno County Supervisor Brian Pacheco and Mendota Mayor Silva said.

Pacheco gestured at a large photo of a ramshackle homeless encampment set up by out-of-work farm laborers on the outskirts of Mendota as proof of the need to pump more Delta water for farms. “This is like a Third World country, and we’re better than that,” Pacheco said. “The people of the Valley deserve better than that.”

Silva pointed to another photo showing a crowd of people lined up for a monthly distribution of emergency food aid in Mendota. “When you cut off water to farmers on the west side and they get a zero allocation, that means less jobs, and this is what’s happened,” Silva said. “This is the tragic thing that’s happening in our community. This is unreal and this is unacceptable.”

Silva added that residents in west-side farm towns like Mendota, Firebaugh, San Joaquin and Tranquillity “want jobs, and the only way they’re going to get back to work is to get an allotment of water.”

California’s extended drought is also hitting cities like Selma and Visalia, where the municipal water supplies are pumped entirely through wells from the underground water table. “We’re on a fairly strong aquifer here that decreased three feet last year,” Robertson said. “We expect it will go down quite a bit more this year unless there is more rainfall, which no one is anticipating.”

Pacheco said water from Northern California can also relieve the strain on the Valley’s depleted underground water supply.

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