

Tony Boren: Valley's 'One Voice' met by Sen. Boxer's deaf ears

By Tony Boren

For the last 13 years, the Fresno Council of Governments (Fresno COG) has hosted "One Voice" trips to Washington, D.C. The primary purpose of the trips have been to take elected officials, public administrators and private sector stakeholders to our nation's capital, in an effort to highlight various projects and programs critical to the Fresno County region and seek funding for those projects which were in need.

In the years 2003 through 2010, One Voice efforts focused primarily on obtaining earmarks for various projects of regional significance and to a large degree we were successful in that we brought back over \$16 million in earmarks for transportation projects and social service programs.

However, in 2010 Congress began a moratorium on earmarks and our One Voice "mission" changed along with it. The One Voice trip became one of advocacy for policy and regulatory reform benefiting our region.

That brings us to this year's One Voice trip, held April 11-16, and its primary focus on the drought, with the San Joaquin Valley's fourth year of water shortages affecting our communities and economies.

The trip included meetings with the San Joaquin Valley's congressional representatives, our two senators, staff from the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, the U.S. Department of Interior, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and a variety of other regulatory entities.

What became clear after the first meeting with someone other than our own congressmen was the degree to which Washington regulatory agency bureaucrats saw the drought as primarily a "California problem." Members of the delegation were surprised and offended by how the drought with all of its human and economic suffering was somewhat dismissed by regulatory bureaucrats as something that they were unable to address due to potential lawsuit concerns from environmental groups like the National Resources Defense Council.

As troubling as it was to hear these responses, it was even more disheartening to hear our own Sen. Barbara Boxer state the misinformation that agriculture uses 80% of California's water. Mendota Mayor Robert Silva looked her square in the eye and told her that she was wrong, that agriculture uses about 50%.

It made little difference as she responded by saying "her scientists" tell her that it is 80%, and that global climate change was the culprit behind the drought. Meetings with Sen. Dianne Feinstein were much more productive as she offered several specific steps she would take to help us with Gov. Jerry Brown, who seems to hold all of the cards when it comes to making additional water available to the San Joaquin Valley.

What has become clearer and clearer to the One Voice delegation with each trip to Washington is that our ongoing challenge is to convey to the country and the world the significant drought "human impacts" that are occurring to many who live in Fresno County and the San Joaquin Valley. First-person accounts of farm workers having to use port-a-potties and bottled water to shower, long food lines to feed those farm workers who have lost work, increases in cases of asthma and Valley Fever due to the increase in ambient dust throughout the Valley, as well as the multimillion dollar loss of hard-earned investments in public and private landscaping are all sad examples of the drought's impacts.

Fresno COG, in partnership with many other public agencies, will continue to advocate on behalf of the Fresno County region. But make no mistake: We need to grab the attention of the entire country if we are to be successful.

It is a sad commentary that so many of our fellow Americans have no clue how their produce is grown or gets to market. The Washington bureaucrats love their "healthy" salad bars so perhaps they will begin to pay attention when

the price skyrockets due to the drought or when they realize that food imports from other countries are not required to undergo the rigorous food safety inspections that occur with our homegrown produce. One can only hope.

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