

Drought is making matters worse for farmworkers

By Noe Paramo and Juanita Ontiveros

In one word, “abysmal” describes the impact the drought is having on farmworkers and the communities in which they live.

Farmworkers already face issues of low education, low wages, poor access to health care, legal representation, uncertain immigration status; they often have inadequate housing, food and access to drinking water. The drought is compounding the situation and placing farmworkers in extreme poverty.

Farmworkers are the backbone of the Central Valley economy, representing 38 percent of all jobs and generating \$6.6 billion in economic activity in Fresno County alone, according to the Fresno County Farm Bureau.

The agricultural sector has seen growth despite the drought, but farmworkers have seen a drop in seasonal jobs and income. Those who are eligible for unemployment are stretching their income as much as they can. But undocumented farmworkers don’t receive unemployment benefits, and they are in crisis from lack of income.

Generally, farmworker wages have not kept up, averaging \$9 to \$11 per hour. Tulare County already had one of the highest poverty rates in the Valley, but the drought has cost the county about 17,000 ag-related jobs, according to a UC Davis report.

When fields are fallowed, farmworkers who work as irrigators lose their jobs. As a result, one effort to help farmworkers is the Drought Relief Employment Training Program, which will provide training opportunities for workers in nine counties – the eight San Joaquin Valley counties plus San Luis Obispo. This is a good first step, but more investment in training needs to be made before farmworkers will benefit.

Many farmworkers have mixed-status families, and hunger continues to be an issue. The CalFresh program does not serve all undocumented farmworkers, an irony since they help put that food on the table. As a result, the drought has caused farmworkers to rely on emergency food programs. Often, this is inadequate for farmworkers to support their families, driving them deeper into poverty.

This drought will affect Central Valley farmworkers’ health. Undocumented farmworkers were left out of the Affordable Care Act. Making matters worse, even though they are the backbone of our multibillion-dollar agricultural community, the majority of the undocumented have no health care beyond what is available at emergency rooms.

The drought has created a health risk for farmworkers because they are also losing their source of water. Many wells have gone dry, and the workers don’t have the funds to get in line for deeper wells. But even a deeper well is no assurance they will have adequate, quality drinking water. Alternatives include connecting small towns and unincorporated communities to larger systems.

Another issue is that of water rate disparities. Community surveys have shown that in rural areas, farmworker households pay water bills that are three or four times higher than in urban areas such as Fresno. When you consider the lack of work, low wages, inadequate housing, food and other costs, the drought creates a situation no family should have to face.

Proposition 1 invests \$260 million for the most at-risk communities, eventually providing access to quality water for farmworkers. Along with other funding, we must assure that efficient and effective water systems are provided and sustained to provide quality and affordable drinking water in our farmworker communities, households and the schools that educate the children.

Farmworkers contribute to California's economy. Some kind of relief should be in place to provide opportunities to better their lives, their children's lives and to improve our Valley. Abysmal is not acceptable; we must do better to help farmworkers who remain marginalized and who suffer the most from the drought.

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