

Report: Valley nonprofits stretched thin by epic drought

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Four years into an epic drought, nonprofits in the San Joaquin Valley are stretched thin.

That's [according to a new report](#) prepared by the Fresno Regional Foundation and funded by the California Endowment. The report authors surveyed 60 community organizations, conducted in-depth interviews with organization leaders and held four workshops in July with 69 representatives.

[Fresno Regional Foundation](#) started researching in May with goals of revealing hidden community-level impacts of the drought and highlighting nonprofits, which have not been the focus of previous studies.

Survey responses indicated that many organizations struggle to keep up with demand and need more funding to increase drought-related programs and build capacity. Just 11 percent of respondents said their organizations are well-prepared to meet the needs of their clients. Some said they have lost revenue from growers and other agriculture-related businesses.

21,000 The number of drought-related job losses throughout the state estimated by University of California at Davis

Meanwhile, 95 percent of respondents rated the impact of the drought as moderate or severe on their organizations and clients. They listed income loss, inadequate access to food, reduced water access and stress as significant effects.

Anne Schonfield, co-author of the report, said the main takeaway is urging people to invest in the organizations serving the hardest-hit communities.

"These nonprofits are really the boots on the ground," she said. "The problem isn't over even when it rains. It's a very long-term problem."

She also said people outside the Valley need to know the drought isn't just affecting farms, lawns and shower times.

"There's just not a lot of recognition that the drought is very seriously hitting poor, rural communities and they are very seriously suffering from it," she said.

Seventy-two percent of respondents said economic insecurity due to reduced agricultural employment has affected their clients most significantly. An [economic analysis released in August](#) by the University of California at Davis echoes that thought. The analysis estimates the drought has led to the loss of more than 10,000 seasonal farm jobs – about 5 percent – and 21,000 total job losses throughout the state.

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Anne Schonfield, co-author of the report

Community organizations noted that clients need more assistance meeting basic needs and said the [drought brings more stress](#), especially for families in rural areas. They said the drought hits the poorest and most vulnerable people hardest, including the undocumented, seniors and homeless, and makes their pre-existing problems worse.

Hugh Ralston, CEO of Fresno Regional Foundation, said the foundation can help nonprofits coordinate efforts and train small organizations in grant writing.

"What we're sure of and what the study is showing us is the nonprofits are actually, if you will, on the sharp end of the

plow,” he said. “It’s where people impacted by the drought turn to when they need help.”

Now nonprofits need help, too. Ralston said he is encouraged that they are starting to think creatively.

One organization doing just that is [Proteus](#). Program operations coordinator Herminia Gonzalez said they’ve shifted some of the time-consuming burden of data entry off field officers, instead sharing it among those in the operations department. That means field officers can spend more time with the communities they serve.

Gonzalez said Proteus is also trying to coordinate better with other organizations. For example, one worker is stationed in East Porterville with [Community Services Employment Training](#).

Proteus knows how to respond to disasters, Gonzalez said. Still, she said the drought has weakened some of the organization’s main grants to help those affected by the drought, such as the East Porterville residents whose wells have gone dry.

“We have a lot of work, but that’s good stress,” she said. “We can go home and take a shower. These people can’t.”

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