

# How drought has hit farmworkers hard in Fresno, Tulare counties

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Maria Lopez finished her last day of work picking lettuce in mid-November praying that more would come soon.

## SPECIAL REPORT: FROM DROUGHT TO EL NIÑO

With no farm jobs available in Huron, Lopez drove more than an hour each way to a farm in Paso Robles for the entire season. Her next-best job prospect is at the same farm for another round of lettuce harvesting in January. If she doesn't manage to secure a spot, she could be out of work until April.

Lopez was among 200 people on a recent Wednesday lined up in a Huron parking lot for food assistance, many of them farmworkers. The 43-year-old mother of four saved what little she could, but fears it won't stretch far enough to pay the bills until she finds work again.

"We are all poor here," she said in Spanish, clutching the ticket that put her at No. 117 in line. "We make just enough to survive."

Despite statewide increases last year in farm employment and gross production value, the drought has dealt farmworkers in some parts of the central San Joaquin Valley a big blow.

Farms across California hired about 350 more workers last year, a modest increase from the 174,775 workers in 2013. It's the highest annual figure for at least 10 years, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Labor.

But in Fresno County, farms employed 1,000 fewer workers than the average employed per year during the pre-drought period of 2009-11.

And in Tulare County, there were 1,500 fewer employees last year compared to before the drought. That's a drop of nearly 19 percent.

We make just enough to survive.

Maria Lopez, 43, farmworker

The situation is different in Madera County, which saw an increase of more than 600 workers from years before the drought to last year. There are more workers in Merced and Kern counties, too. Data wasn't available for Kings County.

An [economic analysis released in August](#) by the University of California, Davis, estimates the drought led to the loss of more than 10,000 seasonal farm jobs this year – about 5 percent – and 21,000 total job losses throughout the state.

A 5 percent decrease might not seem like much, but one-fourth of that loss is concentrated in Fresno and Tulare counties alone.

One farmer who was forced to cut jobs is Dan Errotabere, who has fallowed about 1,500 acres of his 5,200-acre farm in Five Points for the past two years. As a result, he eliminated 10 of his 35 summer jobs.

"I've been trying not to lose my year-round people," he said. "Those folks have been with me for 20-plus years."

Workers are cut from the bottom. The most vulnerable are first to go.

Errotabere now grows fewer acres of tomatoes, garlic, garbanzo beans and melons in favor of keeping his almonds alive. He used to grow cantaloupes and lettuce, but stopped years ago when, he says, water allocation became unstable.

“Most of our crops are machine-harvested,” he said. “Because labor is a challenge, we focus on the crops that we can do the most with the least.”

## Changing industry

The Community Food Bank started a distribution program in May for people whose jobs have been affected by the drought. Food is distributed every other week in Huron, San Joaquin, Mendota, Firebaugh and Orange Cove.

Drought relief coordinator Susie Mendoza said food distributions have increased every week as it gets colder and work becomes more scarce. In Firebaugh, 324 families lined up for food on Nov. 5, up by almost 100 from two weeks before.

“The food is really helpful,” she said, “but what people want is to work.”

Nearly one in four Tulare County families lives below the federal poverty level and relies on food stamps, according to the American Community Survey. In Huron, a town of 6,700 in Fresno County, 42 percent of families live under the poverty level and rely on food stamps. Two-thirds of workers are in agriculture or related industries.

This reality is in harsh contrast to the fact that California’s farm economy has boomed in spite of the drought.

In Fresno County last year, farm products were worth [more than \\$7 billion](#) – up 9 percent from the previous year, according to the annual crop and livestock report. In Tulare County, they grossed [more than \\$8 billion](#), 10 percent more than in 2013.

That’s because farmers like Errotabere diverted more of their shrinking water supplies to high-value crops such as almonds and pistachios. And many are beginning to use machines where possible.

Cantaloupe, leaf lettuce and broccoli are among the crops that decreased in value last year in Fresno County.

Certain crops produced in the Valley suffered last year, including cantaloupe and leaf lettuce in Fresno County. Broccoli also decreased in value by almost 55 percent, down nearly \$13 million with reductions in acres, yield and price. Farm labor expert Don Villarejo said that’s because the drought caused farmers to pump more groundwater, which contains more salts. Broccoli doesn’t like salt.

Shipments of California fruits and vegetables (not including raisins, wine grapes and processing vegetables) decreased in tonnage last year by more than 6 percent over pre-drought years, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“These are the most labor-intensive commodities we have,” Villarejo said. “That’s a big hit.”

While some labor-intensive crops have declined, others, such as mandarins and tangerines, are on the rise. In Fresno and Tulare counties, though, that increase is not enough to make up the difference in lost jobs.

Villarejo, who founded the [California Institute for Rural Studies](#), says fewer workers are now employed for longer periods. More trees and vines, rotating crops more than once per season, and long-season berries have led farmworkers to settle. According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey, 84 percent of California farmworkers don’t migrate. The latest survey was administered from 2010 to 2012 by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Most workers are hired by farm labor contractors instead of by farms, Villarejo said. Workers are more likely to have fluctuating schedules, maybe working six days one week and two the next. The hiring shift is associated with fewer

benefits like housing, health insurance and union contracts.

Farmworkers are also earning less. The average farmworker earns about [\\$20,000 per year](#) in California. Villarejo said average hourly earnings, adjusted for inflation, are 19 percent lower today than they were 40 years ago.

There have been some government efforts to help: An estimated 267 agriculture workers legally residing throughout the state, most in Fresno and Tulare counties, will be [trained in renewable energy jobs](#) through a state grant of \$1.7 million. The training grant accompanies a federal grant of up to \$18 million that provides temporary work for those affected by the drought.

But the Department of Labor survey shows 60 percent of crop farmworkers in California are undocumented. And temporary work or training won't reach everyone in need.

## **Moving away**

With already unsteady work made more so by prolonged drought, farmworkers could be forced to uproot. Some already have.

Average daily attendance at Westside Elementary School in Five Points is down 10 percent from 240 students in 2011. This year, superintendent/principal Baldomero Hernandez expects attendance to be 215 students.

Students gone means state funding lost, and Hernandez worries he'll have to lay off some of his 29 employees. He hasn't reached that point yet because of retirements and last-minute funding changes.

Other small, rural districts have reported declining enrollments due to the drought, including Kings Canyon Unified in Reedley and Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified.

Westside's issues didn't start with the drought, but the drought isn't helping. Enrollment has been declining for years. Only 12 classrooms of 30 are in use.

"I have nightmares about it," Hernandez said.

He said he remembers when fields surrounding his school were filled with cantaloupe, asparagus, broccoli and onion.

"Every field had a different type of vegetable. Now what you see are trees," he said.

2,500 The number of workers cut from farms in Fresno and Tulare counties last year, according to U.S. Department of Labor figures

With fewer jobs available, many of those who could move away have, Hernandez said. Others are too poor to leave.

"It's a slow cancer destroying a way of life," he said. "Most people don't get it. Most people don't care."

Phil Martin, professor emeritus of agricultural and resource economics at UC Davis, thinks people will look back on this drought as a period of change for farm labor. He compared it to the mid- to late 1960s, when there was an increase in mechanization and the end of the Bracero program, which brought in temporary workers from Mexico during and after World War II.

"We see the response to fewer workers coming in, a lot of farmers trying to hang on to the workers they have, a lot of interest in mechanization or machine aids," he said.

For those already here, moving could be daunting if not seemingly impossible. Martin said a big question mark still hangs over next year.

"Some of them own homes in places like Mendota," he said. "They are low value. If water and melons come back,

they don't have to move. At some point, they have to decide.”

Back in Huron, Lopez hauled boxes of food into her red Ford SUV – rice, canned beans, tomato sauce and fruit, bags of pretzels and chopped broccoli, grapefruit juice and bottled water.

It was cold when she and a few others arrived at 8 a.m. to wait for the distribution to start. By the time she left after 10 a.m., the line wrapped around the parking lot and wind whipped through the trees.

Lopez hasn't yet thought about leaving Huron, her home for 24 years. Her plan is to wait out the drought.

“I think this year it's going to rain,” she said. “But if the farmers who stopped planting lettuce don't plant something else soon, we'll have to find somewhere else to go.”

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