

California Seeing Brown Where Green Used to Be

By [JENNIFER MEDINA](#)/New York Times

FEB. 13, 2014

SELMA, Calif. — Fields that in any other year would be filled with broccoli, melons and onions are instead dusty patches of dirt. Farmers are calculating losses that add up with each arid day. Thousands of farm workers who rely on paychecks for tending the fields are expected to go unemployed this year.

“It’s as worse as I’ve ever seen it, I’ll tell you that right now,” said Bill Chandler, who runs a nearly 500-acre farm, growing raisin grapes, peaches and almonds.

For more than a century, Mr. Chandler’s family has watered crops from a canal near his ranch, which holds rainwater and runoff from the nearby Sierra mountain range. Last summer — and the summer before that — it was dry. This year, Mr. Chandler does not even expect to see a trickle of water through the cracked dirt. “People would like to think a few storms will solve our problems, but that’s not even going to get us close,” he said.

With California facing its worst drought in modern history, President Obama will visit Fresno on Friday with the state’s two senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, who are promoting legislation that would offer \$300 million in aid. The bill would also simplify the process of buying water from other areas and allow changes to try to divert more water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to farmers.

But with Republicans in the House pushing instead for an overhaul of environmental protections of the delta, there are few immediate solutions in sight for the Central Valley, a massive stretch of land in the middle of the state that provides nearly half of the nation’s produce. State officials have already said that they will not be able to offer any water to the farmers through California’s vast network of canals. And federal officials are expected to announce that their web of reservoirs will not provide any water this year either, leaving thousands of farmers to rely exclusively on private wells.

“This is a real idling of land, and there is nothing positive about it,” said Daniel A. Sumner, an agriculture economist and the director of the [Agricultural Issues Center at the University of California, Davis](#). “It’s not fallowing — that implies a choice. This is not like North Dakota, where we know it’s going to get better. We’re talking either spending huge sums on bringing water in or thousands of acres lost.”

It is still too early to know whether the drought will create widespread food shortages or price increases, as farmers are still deciding what they will plant this spring. But by any measure, the outlook is grim.

Less than a month ago, Mr. Sumner and other experts estimated that 300,000 acres of rich farmland in the region would go unplanted. Now, he has nearly doubled that estimate.

“I haven’t learned anything yet that tells me it is less severe than we might have hoped,” he said.

The drought could translate into an \$11 billion loss in annual state revenue from agriculture, according to the [California Farm Water Coalition](#), an industry advocacy group. And in the Central Valley, where farming and food processing provide nearly 40 percent of all jobs, the most acute pain is most likely to be felt among low-level employees, who scrape by with seasonal work.

The immense flatland west of the Sierra Nevada is maintained through extraordinary engineering efforts that send billions of gallons of water from the north to irrigate some three million acres of farmland. Here, farmers are insistent that jobs are tied directly to water, and they routinely protest environmental restrictions that limit their supply from the Sacramento delta. Signs like “Food grows where water flows” and “No water = no jobs,” dot the highways. These days, electric billboards usually reserved for traffic information flash this message: “Serious drought. Help save water.”

In previous droughts, unemployment in some towns climbed as high as 45 percent, a number many expect to see this year, according to the Westlands Water District, the largest federally controlled provider in the state.

“Even if we’re able to make it work, which is really still a question, there are going to be many people who really suffer tremendously and simply cannot put food on their tables,” said Sarah Clark Woolf, who helps run her family’s farming operation, Clark Brothers, in Five Points, southwest of Fresno. The farm is keeping about half of its 1,200 acres empty this year, which means fewer temporary workers and a smaller profit margin.

Switching crops would have little impact, farmers say, because anything they plant would need water. Many farmers have traded vegetable row crops for trees growing almonds and pistachios, which are more profitable but require water year-round.

Like many farms here, Clark Brothers abandoned traditional flooding several years ago in favor of drip irrigation, which delivers a smaller and more concentrated amount of water to the crops. This year, Ms. Woolf’s farm will be forced to rely entirely on the ground wells it owns, pumping what they need to keep the existing crops healthy. But there is no way to know how much water is available underground — and with neighboring farmers doing the same, it is only a matter of time before the wells run dry.

“It’s like a bank account that is going to run out, and you don’t know when,” Ms. Woolf said, standing near her fields of garlic, where workers were laying rubber irrigation tubes under the murky cloudless skies. “With no rain, we’re not recharging what we’re taking. Nobody wants to do it this way, but you make the decision where to plant just based on where you can get the water to for as long as it lasts.”

Digging a new well can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and these days, even finding someone to do it can be impossible. With so many constituencies desperate for water, companies that dig wells have yearlong waiting lists. And in some places, the water quality has already deteriorated so drastically that irrigating with well water would only hurt the crops.

When thousands of farmers gathered at the [World Ag Expo](#) in nearby Tulare this week, booths selling sophisticated products meant to measure every drop of water were crowded with would-be buyers. High-tech systems that once might have been dismissed as too costly were being examined by even some of the smallest operations.

“We have trees coming in that we already paid for, and we don’t know how to water them,” said Cameron Kaplan, who manages his grandfather’s citrus trees in Visalia, Calif. “I’m looking for anything I can find.”

But the most ubiquitous proposed solution was far simpler, emblazoned on T-shirts and used as a greeting: “Pray for rain.”

A version of this article appears in print on February 14, 2014, on page A14 of the New York edition with the headline: California Seeing Brown Where Green Used to Be. [Order Reprints](#)[Today's Paper](#)[Subscribe](#)