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AGRICULTURE

Despair flows as fields go dry and unemployment rises

San Joaquin Valley farms are laying off workers and letting fields lie fallow as their water ration falls.

By Alana Semuels

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Reporting from Mendota, Calif. — Water built the semi-arid San Joaquin Valley into an agricultural powerhouse. Drought and irrigation battles now threaten to turn huge swaths of it into a dust bowl.

Farmers have idled half a million acres of once-productive ground and are laying off legions of farmhands. That's sending joblessness soaring in a region already plagued by chronic poverty.

Water scarcity looms as a major challenge to California's \$37-billion agricultural industry, which has long relied on imported water to bloom. The consequences of closing the spigot are already evident here in rural Fresno County, about 230 miles north of Los Angeles. Lost farm revenue will top \$900 million in the San Joaquin Valley this year, said UC Davis economist Richard Howitt, who estimates that water woes will cost the recession-battered region an additional 30,000 jobs in 2009.

Standing in a parched field in 104-degree heat, valley farmer Joe Del Bosque pointed to cracked earth where tomatoes should be growing. He didn't bother this year because he can't get enough water to irrigate them. He's cultivating only about half of the cantaloupe and asparagus that he did in 2007. He has slashed his workforce, and his bills are mounting.

"We can't survive at 10% of our water," said Del Bosque, 60, a white cowboy hat, long sleeves and jeans protecting him from the blistering sun.

Desperation is rippling through agricultural communities such as Mendota, 35 miles west of Fresno, where an estimated 39% of the labor force is jobless. It's a stunning figure even for this battered community of about 10,000 people, which has long been accustomed to double-digit unemployment rates.

Sporadic food giveaways by churches and nonprofits draw hundreds of people. Enrollment in area schools has dropped by a quarter this year. Crime is up, so much, in fact, that the cash-strapped town voted in May to form its own police department rather than rely on the county sheriff.

On a recent afternoon, a dozen men in white T-shirts and jeans were leaning against a liquor store wall across from City Hall, hoping someone would hire them. Others, such as Candelario Torres, sat in the shade of Kiki's Pool Hall, playing cards and swatting flies. They, too, waited for the slim chance a farmer would employ them to weed tomato fields or pick cantaloupe.

"There's no water, so there's no work," said Torres, a 56-year-old father of three who doesn't have a car and can't go far to look for jobs. "Everyone in here is looking."

It's much the same in rural towns such as Firebaugh and Huron, whose jobless farm laborers helped pushed the Fresno County unemployment rate to 15.4% in May, above the California rate of 11.5% and up from 9.4% a year earlier.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger last month asked President Obama to declare Fresno County a disaster area to boost federal aid. But that's not what the farmers say they want. At a recent town hall meeting in Fresno, while some women in the audience knitted, men in baseball caps and T-shirts shouted down officials from the Interior Department: "We don't want welfare, we want water."

But climate change is intensifying competition for this resource and may well force changes in the way the valley has been farmed for decades.

This area, once known as part of the great California desert, has always depended on water from somewhere else. In the early part of the century, homesteaders dug wells or hauled water from up north, but in 1952 they banded together to form the Westlands Water District. It later contracted to buy water from the federal government, which built a system of canals and reservoirs that captures water in the northern part of the state and sends it to farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Because of its subordinate water rights, the 600,000-acre Westlands Water District is often last on the long list of groups receiving water from this federal project. In the last two years, below-average rainfall and a shrinking snowpack have made the supply even tighter than usual.

Statewide runoff -- the amount of rainfall and snow melt that ends up in rivers and streams -- was 53% of normal in 2007 and 58% of normal in 2008, said Lester Snow, director of the California Department of Water Resources. The federal government-run water supply allotted only half the water that farmers south of the delta had been expecting in 2007, and 40% in 2008.

This year has been even drier after a federal court ordered that pumps moving water through the system be turned down to protect endangered species including delta smelt, salmon and green sturgeon. The pumps can reverse the water flow and trap salmon in the river, pulverize fish or ensnare them on screens, said Maria Rea, supervisor of the Sacramento office of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Farmers in the Westlands Water District have protested at Fresno City Hall, joined a March for Water that stretched from Mendota to the San Luis Reservoir, and posted signs along Interstate 5 declaring the area a "Congress Created Dust Bowl."

"We taught the entire world how to grow crops," said Tom Stefanopoulos, owner of Stamoules Produce, bitterly. "But this is the first time we've had to compete with fish."

Stefanopoulos, who owns one of the largest farms in the Westlands district, has planted fewer seasonal row crops this year, but hasn't lost any of his precious pistachio trees. But a neighboring farm, lacking water, left its plum orchard to die. Weeds and dead branches now litter the ground next to Stamoules' field of sweet corn.

Valley farmers aren't the only ones suffering. Increasingly, when it comes to water, one industry's livelihood is another's loss.

The more water that's pumped from the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta, which stretches from Yolo County near Sacramento to the lower parts of San Joaquin County, the more that wildlife from the area is harmed, said C. Mark Rockwell, California representative of the Endangered Species Coalition. There hasn't been a commercial or recreational salmon fishing season in California or in certain parts of Oregon in the last two years, he said.

Pulling water from the delta also lets more seawater in from the San Francisco Bay, sully farms near Sacramento, said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director of advocacy group Restore the Delta.

"There really isn't enough water to go around, particularly in a drought year," Rockwell said.

Fights will probably escalate in the face of global warming, said Juliet Christian-Smith, a senior research associate at the Pacific Institute.

"We have a new climate reality, and our old structure for allocating water will not work for the future," she said. "Fish are just one sign of an ecosystem that's collapsing."

Officials have discussed a variety of long- and short-term fixes, including transferring water from other areas, installing gates to protect the smelt and increasing the statewide storage of water.

But Del Bosque and other farmers said they couldn't survive even one more year of stingy water allocation. Some are considering quitting the business. Field hands too are looking to other industries. But there aren't many options now that the region's construction boom has gone bust.

Valley farmworker Cecilia Reyes said some of her neighbors drive from Fresno County to places as far as Bakersfield, Hollister and Gilroy to look for work, returning at night to be with their families.

Reyes, a slight woman clad in a baseball cap emblazoned with the word "Angel," a handkerchief and long sleeves, said she felt lucky that she recently had found three days' work weeding tomato fields. "I hope there's more work this year," she said in Spanish. "If there's not, I don't know what I'll do."

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