

## **San Joaquin Curtailment Demonstrates Vulnerability of Western Agriculture**

By Dan Keppen  
Executive Director  
Family Farm Alliance

As food and fuel prices soar, more and more Americans are beginning to realize that the fundamental foundations for their well-being are beginning to erode. Amazingly absent in the growing public dialogue about these matters is a demonstration of leadership and courage by our elected (and soon-to-be-elected) officials to confront the root causes of the epidemic of problems hitting us at once. Alarming developments in our nation's number one farm county may provide the wake-up call to enlighten politicians and a mainstream media that appears disinclined to report on the looming extinction of rural Western communities.

This past June, as a result of an extremely dry spring (three San Joaquin Valley cities has their lowest rainfall total on record), implementation of court-ordered water delivery restrictions on Central Valley Project (CVP) operations related primarily to protect fish, pumping out of California's Bay-Delta were curtailed to minimum capacity during June and at 80% for the rest of the summer. For the producers in Westlands Water District, this means they will have a scant six inches of water to quench the thirst of permanent crops like almonds over a 3-month period.

The past three historically dry months, together with new regulatory restrictions, have led to the "perfect storm" of hydrologic and regulatory drought.

Lawsuits launched by environmental activists have effectively throttled the ability to move water (even surplus water offered up by northern California water users) out of the Delta and into San Luis during summer months. Groundwater resources on the west side of the valley are insufficient to make up for the lost CVP surface supplies.

In the absence of other alternatives to pursue, local water users have developed a rationing proposal intended to avoid a catastrophic total depletion of stored water in San Luis Reservoir, which is fed by water pumped out of the Bay-Delta.

The situation facing farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley is unprecedented. The dire challenge for them this summer will be to implement triage: holding the inevitable economic and environmental harm from these reductions to a minimum, while ensuring that the health and safety of the communities that depend on these water supplies are protected. Vast expanses of crops that have already been planted (tomatoes and cotton, for example) may be abandoned in the fields. At a minimum, permanent orchard stands will be permanently damaged, if not destroyed. The drought will have a major impact on the San Joaquin Valley's multibillion-dollar agriculture industry and local economy.

This is tragic and unfair. These producers are some of the most innovative people I know. They have employed savvy and determination for many years – taking the high road all along – only to have their efforts to reach solution denied by administrative, judicial and statutory restrictions beyond their control. Listening to these guys, I want to offer up some sort of words of encouragement, some avenue to pursue that will get them out of this nightmare. But this time, it looks like they've run out of options.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger drew attention to this crisis when he issued a declaration of drought in early June, which may light a fire under state legislators to finally support the governor's plan to build new dams, repair Delta levees, and implement more conservation measures. If the drought declaration ultimately contributes to a massive bond measure being placed on the November ballot to fund these actions, San Joaquin farmers may look back at the Governor's declaration years from now and breathe a sigh of appreciation.

That's assuming there are any farmers left. First, San Joaquin growers have to survive this year. Next year could be even worse, since it may take record precipitation next winter for San Luis Reservoir to fill and give the CVP water users a fighting chance in 2009.

Unfortunately, for the short-term, Governor Schwarzenegger's drought declaration only really encouraged people to conserve water, provide grant money for said conservation, and facilitate water changes - where possible. (Within days of the governor's drought declaration, water was being traded between farmers at a whopping \$950 per acre-foot.) The drought declaration did not suspend any water quality or environmental laws that have driven the "regulatory" component of the drought, a component that is significant, and controllable.

It is almost unbelievable that California's population has swelled to over 37 million and the state has not constructed a new surface water storage facility in over three decades. Environmental activists and their allies in urban newspapers would have you believe that dams, irrigation and farm runoff are responsible for declining fish populations. Therefore, they reason, agriculture deserves the blame for the water crisis, and the consequences.

On the other hand, more logical types point to "legislative dysfunction" and "lack of political will" by elected officials as reasons why legislators continue to delay the necessary measures needed to expand and modernize water infrastructure. At least in Sacramento, it is clear that recent leadership in the California Senate and Assembly have accepted the arguments of the anti-dam, anti-farming activists and have prevented water supply enhancement initiatives to move forward.

It is truly unfortunate that water wars are being fought in California and throughout the West simply because we have not had the vision to develop new, environmentally sound, sources of water.