

Posted on Mon, Sep. 05, 2005

River spells life for small town

Demands for housing are putting new pressures on the San Joaquin

By JULIANA BARBASSA

Associated Press

ORANGE COVE - Workers' hands plunge into the swiftly flowing stream, sorting out fruit with blemishes as conveyor belts shuttle thousands of oranges around the room, dividing them by size, packing them into crates. Outside the packing plant, lush green groves cover the surrounding hills, as far as the eye can see.

California grows 80 percent of the nation's eating oranges. Much of that fruit -- about 15 million 75-pound boxes -- passes through this town's nine plants. When the wind hits you right in Orange Cove, the tangy smell of fresh citrus is so strong you can almost taste it.

But while the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada frame the sky, there's little natural water here, explains Harvey Bailey, who works 1,100 acres of oranges and lemons with his brother Lee Bailey. His fruit trees -- like Orange Cove's 9,255 residents -- are sustained by water diverted from the San Joaquin River, 50 miles to the north.

"Without it, we'd just dry up, the farms, the town, everything," said Bailey, whose family initially worked 200 acres of groves around a well in the early 1900s.

Thanks to the Friant Dam, the river water now sustains more than 1,500 square miles of productive farmland on the east side of California's central valley. Not only oranges, but many of the grapes, almonds and other crops that feed the country -- about \$2 billion worth a year -- are grown in a region that gets 110-degree temperatures and only 10 inches of rain a year.

But the agricultural economy can be hard on people like the packing house workers in Orange Cove. When their children graduate from the brand-new Citrus High, most have only three choices -- pick oranges in the fields, pack them in the plants -- or leave.

Their average income -- \$7,126 a year -- ranks among the lowest in the state, according to the 2000 Census. About a quarter of the town's residents are unemployed, and 45 percent of households live in poverty.

Victor Lopez, a former farm worker and the town's mayor for 30 years, helped bring the packing plants to town, creating many reliable jobs. Now he's trying to diversify -- he went to China to pitch Mexican food made in Orange Cove, and is talking to Koreans about establishing a computer-parts assembly plant.

But it all comes down to the river.

"All investment, all our growth, depends on water -- not just ag," he said, standing in the town's brand new rural development and job training center. "Any business that's thinking about coming here, that's the first thing they want to know: do you have water. It's our livelihood, it's everything."

Downstream of the 3,000-foot wide dam, there's just enough water to run for 37 miles. Fish from a state-run hatchery attract herons, egrets and grebes, and Fresno residents come to cool down in the high heat of summer. Beyond that, the river usually runs dry.

But now even this shallow stream has new demands on it -- a developer plans to replace orchards on the riverbank with a new housing complex, the first 180 homes of a 1,646-home subdivision that is expected to grow into the new city of Rio Mesa, population 100,000.

Water for the new homes would come from the San Joaquin, courtesy of decades-old contracts originally given by the Bureau of Reclamation to nearby farmers who had relied on the river to irrigate their fields. Opponents say the contracts were intended for riverside farms, not lawns and car washes. But attorney Tim Jones, representing River Ranch Estates, says it's a case of some water users -- environmentalists and farmers -- wanting to limit access to another user -- his client.

Such battles seem inevitable in the years ahead -- demographers predict the Central Valley's 5.5 million population will more than double to 12 million or more by 2040, as California's population grows from 36.5 million to 51.5 million.

Water is the only thing keeping more farmland from giving way to houses and golf courses.

"We have a lot of people wanting to build," said Bob Waterston, the Fresno County supervisor who oversees the foothills around Friant Dam. "But the first question is, do you have the water? If they can't show the water, you can't let them develop. You're setting yourself up for disaster."