

California: Drought and Jobs - Rural Migration News

12-15 minutes

The lack of water to grow crops dominated farm-related news in the San Joaquin Valley during the spring and summer of 2014. The federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project announced zero allocations for the water agencies in the San Joaquin Valley that buy water from them, although the SWP raised its allocation to five percent in April 2014.

California has eight million acres of irrigated land, and 410,000 acres or five percent are expected to be fallowed in 2014 due to lack of water, including 10,000 acres that would normally be planted to vegetable and melon crops. About 40 percent of California's irrigated crop land, some 3.2 million acres, are planted to trees and vines.

A UCD study released in May 2014 estimated that San Joaquin Valley growers would receive a net 1.5 million fewer acre feet of surface water in 2014, which could lead to 6,400 fewer jobs in crop production, three percent of the average 200,000 farm worker jobs in the San Joaquin Valley and 1.5 percent of the state's average farm employment of 400,000. An additional 8,000 related nonfarm jobs could be lost. Some of the farm and nonfarm jobs expected to be lost are seasonal.

The UCD study estimated a total 6.5 million fewer acre feet of surface water, but assumed that growers would partially replace this missing surface water by pumping five million additional acre feet of ground water. Groundwater is being depleted faster than it is recharged in both normal and drought years.

Droughts are common in the arid west, but the 2014 drought was more significant for several reasons, including a "hardening" of the demand for water as more San Joaquin Valley crops are perennial trees and vines rather than annual crops that farmers can choose not to plant in water-short years.

Agriculture needs cheap water. An acre foot of water is 325,851 gallons, the average annual consumption of a suburban household, for which it pays \$500 to \$1,000. Farmers pay much less. If water costs \$33 an acre foot, it costs one one-hundredth of a cent a gallon; at \$326 an acre foot, water costs one-tenth of a cent per gallon (an acre is 43,560 square feet, and an acre foot of water covers an acre of land to a depth of 12 inches). At \$3,260 an acre foot, water costs one cent a gallon.

The agricultural price of water is often less than \$326 an acre foot. However, in drought years, farmers are willing to pay much higher prices for water to keep their perennial crops alive.

Accepted bids for 12,000 acre feet of water sold by Kern county's Buena Vista Water Storage District in February 2014 totaled \$13.5 million, and most sales were for at least \$1,000 an acre foot. Buena Vista is offering the farmers it serves \$400 an acre not to plant crops in order to free up water for sale.

Experts agree that the major water issue is management rather than availability. The patchwork of water rights that has evolved in California and the west, where pre-1914 "riparian" (first in time, first in right) water rights are senior to post-1914 "junior" water rights, means that the availability and the price of water used in agriculture varies widely. The right to water is generally defined as the right to "put the water to beneficial use."

Variable water prices are one reason why water-intensive crops such as rice are grown within a few hundred miles of orchards willing to pay far more than rice is worth for water to keep their trees alive. Some water districts do not allow their farmer-members to sell water outside the district, fearing that if they allowed water to be sold, a court may decide that farmers did not "need" the water, potentially opening the door to environmentalists or urban water districts that want more water.

Farmers have traditionally argued that the solution to insufficient water is to build more dams and reservoirs and to choose food over fish when deciding how much northern California water can be moved south via the Sacramento-San Joaquin river delta. Rains in March-April 2014 highlighted this fish versus food debate, as farmers complained that too much late spring run off was allowed to flow into the Pacific Ocean. Environmentalists decried stepped-up pumping to send some of the run-off south, saying that threatened fish are killed by the giant pumps that take water from the delta and move it south.

The 2014 drought convinced some farmers that the time has come to make it easier to transfer water from low-value and water-hungry crops such as hay and rice to higher-value fruits and nuts. Many agree that the days of using as much ground water as can be pumped may be ending, especially in the San Joaquin Valley, where wells are dug ever deeper to obtain water.

There are currently no limits on how much water farmers can pump from wells on their land, leading to fears that some of the farmers who share an aquifer may benefit at the expense of others. Banks may become reluctant to lend to growers who want to plant perennial crops on land without reliable rights to surface water, since the alternative is shared ground water.

By one estimate, California farmers have \$50 billion invested in trees and vines that require a reliable water supply. As with farm labor, a widespread assumption among farmers has been that if they plant crops that need water, the federal and state governments would expand the infrastructure to provide water. This assumption is being tested by the drought.

Increasing the efficiency with which farmers use water may not provide additional water supplies for several reasons. First, over-watering crops means that the excess water percolates into the ground, recharging groundwater reserves. Some of this recharging is lost with efficient drip irrigation. Second, experience shows that more efficient irrigation systems often lead to

additional crop plantings and an increased demand for water, as when drip irrigation systems allowed pasture land to be converted to vineyards.

Melons (cantaloupes) are often grown in the water-short western part of Fresno county, and acreage is expected to be stable in 2014 despite the drought because melons require half as much water as cotton. California cotton acreage peaked at over 1.5 million acres in the early 1990s, and today is less than 300,000 acres. The state's melon (cantaloupe) acreage declined from about 50,000 acres in 2003 to less than 40,000 acres in 2013.

Melons are harvested between July and September. In 2013, there was a listeria outbreak linked to cantaloupes from Colorado's Rocky Ford region.

State drought assistance funds for farm workers were released in summer 2014, with job-training and community organizations providing funds to workers who bring water bills and sign affidavits that unemployment or underemployment has caused a loss of income and a hardship. To receive rent assistance, applicants must show they are behind on payments and that their income has been reduced by the drought.

Huron, a city of 7,000 with 1,000 residents registered to vote and 200 who typically cast ballots, was profiled in several media reports. So many residents reportedly left for other areas of California and Pacific Northwestern states to find work that some employers raised wages from \$8 to \$8.50 an hour. With fewer residents, the city of Huron faces a \$2 million deficit.

The California Environmental Protection Agency released a map in April 2014 that showed the state's most polluted region to be a 3,000-person tract in the western part of the city of Fresno, the so-called 93706 Edison zone where agriculture, freeways and industry merge. Residents complain about smells from a nearby Darling International meat processing plant and a Cargill rendering plant.

UC admitted more Hispanic than non-Hispanic white applicants for the Fall 2014 freshman class. California's population of 15 to 19 year olds is 49 percent Hispanic, 29 percent white, 11 percent Asian and six percent Black. Latinos were 29 percent of those admitted by UC for fall 2014, whites 27 percent, Asians 36 percent, and Blacks four percent.

Budget. Governor Brown and legislative leaders in June 2014 agreed on a \$108 billion general fund budget for 2014-15, up slightly from what Brown proposed in January 2014. With bond funding and special funds, state spending in 2014-15 is expected to be \$156 billion.

One reason for more spending is more residents enrolled in Medi-Cal, an expected 11.5 million by 2015. To qualify for Medi-Cal, a family of three must have income of less than \$27,311 annually. The Affordable Care Act expanded eligibility for Medi-Cal, and the federal government covers all of the cost of newly eligible residents who enroll. However, California must pay 50 percent of the cost of new enrollees who were eligible before the ACA but have just signed up. California has run budget deficits for 11 of the last 15 years.

The state's 2014-15 budget includes \$250 million for the \$68 billion high-speed rail project and shifts 25 percent of future revenue from the state's cap-and-trade program to high-speed rail. In April 2015, welfare payments for a family of three in high-cost counties as Los Angeles will increase from \$670 to \$704 a month.

The In-Home Supportive Services Program pays 360,000 workers, including 70 percent who are relatives of persons being cared for, to assist about 450,000 physically and mentally disabled Californians. Hourly earnings of IHSS workers range from \$8 to \$12.20 an hour, depending on the county.

Most IHSS workers are represented by unions, including 250,000 represented by the Service Employees United International-United Long Term Care Workers. Some IHSS workers work more than 40 hours a week, and a federal court ruled that they are entitled to overtime pay for these extra hours beginning January 1, 2015. Governor Brown proposed that IHSS workers be limited to 160 hours a month in order to avoid having to pay overtime wages, but eventually agreed to provide \$180 million in the 2014-15 state budget to cover overtime wages for IHSS workers.

County social workers determine in advance how many hours of care a person needs, segmenting days into a set of tasks that can include cleaning, personal hygiene and some limited medical help.

California plans to issue special licenses to unauthorized migrants beginning January 1, 2015, but the Department of Homeland Security in May 2014 said that the state's proposed special license was too similar to regular driver's licenses. 'California planned to replace the "DL" on the front of regular driver's licenses with a "DP" for "Driving Privilege" on the special licenses. DHS said that federal inspectors might overlook the DP and allow unauthorized migrants to use DP licenses as IDs to board planes.

Nevada's special licenses state "Not Valid for Identification" just above "Driver Authorization Card."

Education. California has a quarter of US immigrants, and a higher share of immigrant and English-learning pupils. Over half of California youth 16 to 26 are immigrants (20 percent) or the children of immigrants (35 percent), and a third of US students designated as English Language Learners are in California.

Almost 45 percent of Hispanic immigrants aged 21 to 26 in California do not have a high-school diploma.

A California Superior Court judge in June 2014 ruled that teacher tenure laws deprived students of their right to an education under the state constitution and violated their civil rights (*Vergara v. California*). Poor students organized as Students Matter and backed by Silicon Valley entrepreneur David Welch sued, arguing that teacher tenure laws make it difficult to remove low-performing and incompetent teachers who often teach poor and minority students.

The judge's 16-page ruling, which some compared to the landmark US Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, is likely to be appealed. The judge ruled that the state constitution guarantees a quality education to all students, that a quality education requires effective teachers, and that tenure prevents school districts from having a uniformly effective teaching staff. Three states have eliminated tenure for K-12 teachers.

President Obama has called education the "civil rights issue" of the 21st century, and US Education Secretary Arne Duncan called the LA ruling a "mandate" to change similar "laws, practices and systems that fail to identify and support our best teachers and match them with our neediest students." The National Education Association, the largest US union with three million members, in July 2014 called for the resignation of Duncan.