

The Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power

July 21, 2008.

By: Miguel Angel Arias – President, Mendota Unified School District

Purpose:

Public Hearing Testimony on The Federal Response to the California Drought Emergency

Testimony:

As President, of the Mendota Unified School District, thank you for coming here to hear testimony on the economic disaster this water shortage has caused and our plea for legislative relief.

Our district is a Preschool-12 grade educational system that with an enrollment of more than 2,400 students. Approximately 95% of student are Latino, 96 percent qualify for reduced or free lunch. 1,200 are considered migrant, while 1,700 are English Learners.

This economic disaster has created an unprecedented challenge for our region and school district. Our City has the largest stock of affordable housing units in the region therefore when workers lose their jobs they move here. As a result, and to the detriment of our neighboring districts we have experienced a growth of almost 200 hundred students in the last two years. At an initial glance you might consider the increase in enrollment a positive given that we operate based on Average Daily Attendance funding (ADA).

However, this assumption does not apply to our district or this situation. The additional ADA funding does not reflect or meet neither the needs of a community with a 40% plus unemployment rate nor our long-term educational facilities needs. Students consider themselves lucky if they have one parent at home because the other is hundreds of miles away working. The fact is that a growing norm for our students is that both parents unemployed. Those who qualify for unemployment benefits are already drawing it down. Creating a situation in which they will have no income when winter arrives. While the others that don't qualify for unemployment benefits must travel long distances or relocate to find work else where.

These challenges and others are not reflected with the ADA increase, but if you look closely you will see clearly the social stresses and financial hardship confronting our students and district. This closer examination will show a district that has experienced a 650% increase in expulsions (06/07-4, 07/08-30), since economic downturn began with the retirement of agricultural lands and now accelerated by the water shortage. Additionally, food cost (30%), and transportation (100%) have increased. Forcing us to shift more funds away from the classroom and into operations.

We all know that a student can not effectively learn when their stomachs growl with hunger. I submit to you that a student also can not learn while their parents, siblings, relatives, neighbors, and community stomachs are growling with hunger as well.

Furthermore, we at Mendota Unified School District recognize that we in the Westside region are in the same economic boat as our neighbors in Firebaugh, San Joaquin, Tranquility, and the surrounding areas. This realization led to an unprecedented collaboration that established the Westside Institute of Technology (WIT). A vocational training center funded by the partnership of Mendota Unified School District, Firebaugh Las- Deltas Unified School District, Golden Plains Unified School District, and West Hills Community College. Additionally, it received a federal earmark of \$148,000 for the establishment of the head quarters in Mendota, Ca. Since its opening a year ago, WIT has trained 223 Westside residents in vocations that our local agricultural economy requires. In spite of our great success our fear is that this investment will be for nothing. If our economy does not get back on track, we risk finding our selves training our residents for jobs outside the area and State.

We also recognize that this economic disaster is a tidal wave that has just begun to gain strength. If there is no legislative resolution to our water shortage Mendota Unified School District will be next in experiencing a decrease in enrollment. The workers that have moved here will permanently move out if the jobs don't return. This uncertainty and lack of a stable tax base limits our ability to fund permanent facilities to accommodate our students. As an example, next door we are undertaking the construction of a new Junior High campus fully funded by State Hardship funds. However, it came in \$5 million over our State allocation. With the assistance of our State representatives and the efforts of our staff we were able to obtain an additional \$2 million to construct the campus. Unfortunately, our hardship qualification will soon expire and our limited tax base only allows us \$6.5 million in future bonding capacity. For that amount we can only build one building. So we see a future of a lot of portable classes if growth continues or one of a lot of empty classes if the tidal wave of economic disaster reaches us. Both are undesirable options.

On a personal note, both of my parents are farmworkers and have been for more than 35 years. During which they managed to own a home and give eight children the opportunity to attend college, all the while not requesting or receiving any public assistance including food stamps. They ask me why government has placed a higher value on a fish than their lively hoods. I try to explain to them the value of preserving wildlife for generations to come and that I am convinced that we can not only co-exist but thrive with the Delta Smelt. They respond, then why must people go hungry before government acts! Unfortunately, I could not answer that question.

In closing, during this national recession we are all feeling the pain of the increase cost of living without increasing paychecks. At times, we expect government to resolve all our problems even those that you have no jurisdiction over. I submit to you, this economic disaster due to water shortage is not one of those unsolvable problems. In this case, the

fish, farmers, water district, and government all have their attorneys advocating their positions. However, the farmworkers and communities who have been dealt the biggest economic blow have neither attorneys nor paid advocates. **But they have you!**

Absent of any legislative action, we are guarantying continued increase in food cost across all our nation, as we rely more on imports while systematically undermining our rural economies.

On behalf of my board of trustees, students, community, and parents, I implore you to reach across party lines and special interest positions and find common ground that provides us the essential water infrastructure necessary to resolve our economic disaster. This can only be resolved by legislative action. Please make the problem at the Delta the top priority as you look at water legislation. You have the destiny our future doctors, engineers, farm workers and our communities in your hands. I hope you will keep us all mind when considering the legislative fixes to this challenge.

Thank you again for you time and attention.