

John P. (Phil) Larson  
Fresno County Board of Supervisors

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Water and Power  
Committee on Natural Resources  
United State House of Representatives  
*"The Federal Response to the California Drought Emergency"*  
July 21, 2008

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Phil Larson, and I am a member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the statewide drought and the impacts it is having on the agricultural industry and families in the Central Valley. I speak with unanimous support from my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors, as evident in an emergency resolution our board passed on June 6, 2008 regarding this issue (attachment A).

I was first elected to represent District One in Fresno County in November 2002 and was re-elected in 2006. District One includes the rich and productive farmland in the western portion of the county all the way to the San Benito County line. As a lifelong farmer and former president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, I continue to advocate for safe and secure water supplies in our region because I understand that without additional water supplies the social, cultural, and economic impacts could be devastating.

Fresno County is blessed to have rich soils and a Mediterranean climate that is ideal for irrigated agriculture. The hard work of farmers who came to Fresno County from all over the world has made the County the richest and most productive agricultural county in America. Our gross agricultural production value in 2006 exceeded the four billion-dollar mark for the fifth consecutive year. The County leads the nation in number of farms (6,592), farms with sales of \$100,000 or more (2,321), and harvested cropland (1.16 million acres).

Unfortunately, our agricultural industry is in a dire situation due to the resource that made this all possible, Water. Coined as the "perfect storm" - below normal rainfall in 2007 and 2008, low snowmelt runoff, and federal court actions to protect Endangered Species Act listed fish species have resulted in very limited Delta pumping operations and restricted San Luis reservoir releases during the period of peak crop demands of June through August 2008.

The lack of available water supplies during the months of June through August 2008, has resulted in the rationing of water by affected Fresno County water districts to their member farmers and these further reductions are resulting in abandonment of current planted seasonal crops and permanent crops. It is anticipated that the cumulative crop reductions will result in the loss of jobs in Fresno County communities and the significant

loss of direct and indirect crop revenue will negatively impact Fresno County businesses and county tax revenue.

As an example, farmers in my district were allocated 0.47 acre-feet per acre for a period considered to be the highest water use months of the year. Over 66,200 acres of almonds (the County's number 2 crop) planted in Westlands Water District are in jeopardy. The crop requires about two acre-feet of water per acre to "finish" the crop, which will be harvested in late August/September. The County's number three crop, processed and fresh market tomatoes will need an additional eight inches of water per acre to bring the mid-July crop to harvest and more water will be required to bring the later season fields to harvest. Likewise, cotton and the fall lettuce crops are also in jeopardy (attachment B). The current water allocation is simply not enough to sustain the overall production of these crops.

This season a major catastrophe was averted by an executive order by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, followed by a state of emergency to address the serious drought conditions and water delivery reductions that exist in California. He ordered the Department of Water Resources to speed water transfers to areas with the worst shortages and other state agencies to help farmers suffering losses from the drought. While the state of emergency has provided temporary relief, there is no assurance of secure water supplies in the future. Realizing this, many farmers in Fresno County have already fallowed over 20,000 acres of farmland, resulting in an estimated production loss of \$86 million (attachment C). I have heard many say they can manage to survive a 40 percent allocation, but they cannot survive with the rationing.

The consequences of such actions affect more than just the farmers who have lost their crops and investment in those crops. Farm workers will not be employed to complete the production and harvest of those crops. In addition, small businesses that exist to provide goods and services to support the activities of farms in Fresno County will be severely impacted. Within the past two years, over 200 students from the small Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District have moved because of the lack of job opportunities for their parents. A farming operation near the City of Firebaugh recently gave most of their employees pink slips due to the uncertainty of water availability. Similar occurrences are taking place in the cities of Mendota, Huron, San Joaquin and Coalinga, and other west side communities. As mentioned by a farmer in my district, "First it's their jobs and next it will be their homes. What will we do then?" (attachment D).

I understand that difficult decisions, which may be unpopular in some quarters, will have to be made if we are to protect a safe and reliable food supply, while providing jobs and serving as the economic engine of our state. It is for these reasons that we must work together to find a long term solution that supports the economy of California and the ability of our farmers to feed and clothe the nation and the world, while preserving our ecosystem.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be honored to accept questions from you at this time.

# Attachment A

RESOLUTION NO. 08-253

1 PROCLAMATION OF EXISTENCE OF A LOCAL EMERGENCY  
2 AND REQUEST FOR THE GOVERNOR TO PROCLAIM A STATE OF EMERGENCY  
3 AND REQUEST FOR A PRESIDENTIAL DECLARATION  
4 AND REQUEST FOR STATE AND FEDERAL ASSISTANCE  
5 BY THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS  
6 COUNTY OF FRESNO, STATE OF CALIFORNIA

7  
8 IN THE MATTER OF THE)

9 2008 DROUGHT CONDITIONS)

RESOLUTION

10  
11 WHEREAS, the Board of Supervisors does hereby find that a dire situation, created by  
12 conditions of extreme peril to the safety of persons and property have arisen within said County,  
13 evidenced by idling of crop land and production loss of agricultural crops, caused by a statewide  
14 drought and water delivery restrictions commencing on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2008 and escalating in  
15 accumulated impact on this County; and

16 WHEREAS, statewide rainfall has been below normal in 2007 and 2008; and

17 WHEREAS, California is experiencing critically dry water conditions in the Sacramento and  
18 San Joaquin River basins and the statewide 2008 runoff forecast is estimated to be 41 percent  
19 below average; and

20 WHEREAS, diversions from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta) for the State  
21 Water Project and federal Central Valley Project (CVP) are being severely restricted due to various  
22 factors including federal court actions to protect Endangered Species Act listed fish species,  
23 resulting in very limited Delta pumping operations and restricted San Luis Reservoir releases  
24 during the period of peak crop demands of June, July and August 2008; and

25 WHEREAS, water storage in many of the State's major reservoirs is far below normal,  
26 including those that supply the State Water Project (SWP) resulting in reduced allocations to the  
27 users of 35 percent; and

28

1           WHEREAS, the federal Central Valley Project is similarly constrained to allow only 40  
2 percent allocations of contracted amounts; and

3           WHEREAS, the pumping and reservoir restrictions will postpone the use of most of the  
4 allocations until after the crop season is over; and

5           WHEREAS, these water delivery reductions will cause Fresno County farmers to idle  
6 thousands of acres of crop land and production loss of seasonal crops; and

7           WHEREAS, in 2008 Fresno County has experienced the driest spring on record resulting in  
8 increased agricultural irrigation demand and reduced rangeland grasses; and

9           WHEREAS, the lack of available water supplies during the months of June through August,  
10 2008 has resulted in the rationing of water by affected Fresno County water districts to their  
11 member farmers and these further reductions are resulting in abandonment of current planted  
12 seasonal crops and permanent crops; and

13           WHEREAS, it is anticipated that the cumulative crop reductions will result in the loss of jobs  
14 in Fresno County communities and the significant loss of direct and indirect crop revenue has  
15 negatively impacted Fresno County businesses' and Fresno County governments' tax revenue;  
16 and

17           WHEREAS, substantial economic impact to agricultural crops, the industry that supports  
18 agriculture and the people who work in the agricultural industry are anticipated; and

19           WHEREAS, local resources are inadequate to cope with the effects of said emergency and  
20 the combined forces of other political subdivisions of the State are required to assist the County to  
21 combat the effects of said emergency;

22           NOW THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY PROCLAIMED AND ORDERED by the Board of  
23 Supervisors of the County of Fresno, State of California, in accordance with state law, that a local  
24 emergency does exist throughout said County;

25           IT IS FURTHER PROCLAIMED AND ORDERED that during the existence of said local  
26 emergency the powers, functions, and duties for the emergency organization of this County  
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1 shall be those prescribed by state law, ordinances and resolutions of this County, and by the  
2 County of Fresno Operational Area Master Emergency Services Plan, as approved by the Board  
3 of Supervisors on May 19, 1998; and

4 IT IS FURTHER PROCLAIMED AND ORDERED that said local emergency shall be  
5 deemed to continue to exist until its termination is proclaimed by the Board of Supervisors of the  
6 County of Fresno, State of California; and

7 IT IS FURTHER PROCLAIMED AND ORDERED that a copy of this resolution be forwarded  
8 to the Governor of California confirming the request by the Board of Supervisors that the Governor  
9 proclaim the County of Fresno to be in a state of emergency; and that the Governor request a  
10 Presidential Declaration; and further that the Governor request any and all State and Federal  
11 assistance programs to provide relief to the growers, individuals, businesses, public agencies and  
12 private agencies that were harmed by this disaster; and

13 IT IS FURTHER REQUESTED that Governor Schwarzenegger relax the water quality  
14 standards to permit blending of ground water with CVP/SWP water in order to increase the water  
15 supply; and

16 IT IS FURTHER REQUESTED that Governor Schwarzenegger petition President Bush's  
17 administration to take immediate action to increase the CVP water supply; and

18 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Fresno County Department of Agriculture request a  
19 U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretarial Disaster Declaration; and

20 IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the state Director  
21 of the Office of Emergency Services.

22 IT IS FURTHER RESOLVED that Bart Bohn, County Administrative Officer, as the  
23 Emergency Services Director is designated as the local Hazard Mitigation Coordinator of the  
24 County of Fresno for the purpose of assessing damage within said County and consulting with  
25 federal or state survey teams about hazard mitigation actions; and

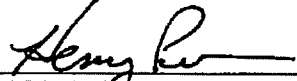
26 IT IS FURTHER RESOLVED that Bart Bohn, County Administrative Officer, as the  
27 Emergency Services Director and Vicki Crow, Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector, are  
28 hereby designated as the authorized representatives for disaster assistance of the County of

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Fresno for the purpose of receipt, processing, and coordination of all inquiries and requirements necessary to obtain available state and federal assistance.

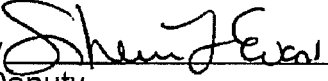
THE FOREGOING was passed and adopted by the following vote of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Fresno this 6th day of June, 2008, to-wit

AYES: Supervisors Larson, Waterston, Anderson, Case, Perea  
NOES: None  
ABSENT: None

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
CHAIRMAN, Board of Supervisors

ATTEST:

BERNICE E. SEIDEL, CLERK  
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

By   
\_\_\_\_\_  
Deputy

Item No. 1  
Resolution No. 08-253

# Attachment B

## **Agriculture Today - June 2008** **Special Section: Water**

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### **West side water supply is reduced, inches per acre will not finish many crops**

**By Liz Hudson, APR**

*FCFB Public Relations Coordinator*

The harsh reality that west side farmers and water officials have been forecasting for 15 years is happening this summer. Farmers may lose valuable crops during the next few months, affecting food supplies, jobs and rural communities, and the county's overall economy because of the simple fact of not having enough water to bring the crops to harvest.

Described as the "Perfect Storm," the combination of a bone-dry spring and unworkable environmental restrictions to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta have resulted in dangerously low levels in San Luis Reservoir, where the water supply for western Fresno County (and much of the southern San Joaquin Valley and Southern California) is stored. At a Congressional Briefing in Los Banos on June 2, farmers, water district and elected officials, agricultural industry representatives, the media and others learned the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reduced the 2008 federal water supply by five percent for agricultural water users south of the Delta, and heard that federal Central Valley Project (CVP) agricultural contractors' water supplies may be restricted between now and the end of August due to limited supplies in San Luis Reservoir. The Bureau will be working with federal water contractors over the next few weeks to refine delivery schedules, notwithstanding that Westlands Water District has already imposed a water rationing plan on its farmers now through August.

The reason for the drastic water cuts during agriculture's peak water demand period stems from the inability to fill San Luis Reservoir because of implementation of court-ordered pumping limitations from January through April, other environmental restrictions on CVP operations, and lack of precipitation during one of the driest springs on record.

"Our water supply has reached its limit," said Rep. Jim Costa, who along with Rep. George Radanovich called for the special briefing from Bureau of Reclamation officials.

"The state's water system is designed for 20 million people, but today we have 37 million people," said Rep. Costa. That system inadequacy and dry conditions have created this "Perfect Storm crisis we see today," he added. "Maybe this crisis is necessary to get some decisions made," he added.

"I'm tired of agriculture bearing the brunt of an old antiquated [water] system. We need to build a peripheral canal and Temperance Flat [reservoir on the San Joaquin River]," said Rep. Radanovich.

The need for long-term fixes was echoed by CA Agricultural Secretary A.G. Kawamura, who said, "We need to do everything to build infrastructure to give a water future for the state."

***The low-point issue***

In the meantime, farmers on the west side of Fresno County are faced with a water-rationed amount of only 0.47 acre-feet per acre between now and the middle-to-end of August, whenever the low-point concern in San Luis Reservoir subsides. The water level in San Luis is critical during summer months, when demand is higher and pumping to fill the reservoir cannot keep up with the amount of water being sent south to farms and communities via the California Aqueduct. This year, that problem has been exacerbated because the driest spring since 1924 did not add to once-encouraging snowpack levels and additional restrictions on export pumping from the Delta because of the Endangered Species Act-listed Delta Smelt and other environmental regulations.

For most of agriculture, June, July and August are the highest water use months when trees, vines, and plants require a necessary amount of water to produce the crop. For example, almonds will require about two acre-feet per acre to "finish" the crop, which will be harvested in late-August/September. Almonds are Fresno County's number two crop, and there are about 66,210 acres planted in Westlands Water District that are in jeopardy.

Likewise, processing and fresh market tomatoes – a prominent crop on the County's west side with more than 101,000 acres in 2007 and the County's number three crop – will need an additional eight inches of water per acre to bring the mid-July crop to harvest and more water will be required to bring the later season fields to harvest. With the rationed amount of water, farmers will receive only about six inches of water per acre during these next two months.

Also impacted will be the County's cotton crop, most of which is grown on the west side of the County. Cotton begins its typical irrigation in June and continues through September. It is the number seven crop in the County.

At question, too, is the fall lettuce crop, which supplies about 95 percent of the nation's supply of head lettuce during the fall marketing period.

Come late-August/September when water demand drops – and if export pumping can resume to normal levels-- the Reservoir can begin to re-fill, and water users can expect to see the short-term rationing lifted. But, now is when most of the crops need the water. On May 29, Westlands' Board of Directors authorized a water rationing plan in response to the growing realization the Bureau would not be able to meet all water demands between now and the end of the low-point period in San Luis Reservoir. District numbers show the CVP share of San Luis Reservoir storage will reach negative 240,000 acre-feet at the end of August, without some actions being taken to either reduce demand or increase water supplies.

Because the Reservoir is a joint federal-state facility, the Bureau and CA Department of Water Resources have been able to work together in past years to manage water levels and accounting during the critical summer water use months. However, because of the combination of a natural and regulatory drought, that flexibility is gone.



"The CVP has lost complete flexibility to manage the project," said John Davis, who's in charge of Bureau operations, citing the restrictions under the biological opinions for ESA-listed species such as the Delta Smelt and salmon.

### ***Short-term fixes?***

Because of the need for increased flexibility during crisis periods like this, the Bureau and others will ask the State Water Resources Control Board to relax the standards, asking for "an emergency review of the standards" to increase pumping from the Delta.

Likewise, efforts are underway to urge Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to declare a drought emergency for the state, which can open up federal drought assistance.

The Bureau will be working with its water district customers to try to work through this short-term crisis by trying to increase flexibility and manage daily operations, and develop "new" water supplies, said Ron Milligan, of Bureau operations. Milligan said the Bureau will be contacting wildlife refuges to see how they help manage their water needs through the low-point period, looking at short-term transfers between districts and regions, as well as working with districts that can utilize groundwater or a fallowing program.

"This is very unusual. We haven't seen this [dry conditions] in quite some time, but it's different because of the regulatory background today," Milligan told those in attendance at the June 2 briefing.

Westlands General Manager Tom Birmingham acknowledged the Bureau's efforts to work with the districts and water managers to help get through this crisis, pointing the blame on the lack of leadership to address long-term water supply problems in the state.

"The people in this room have been screaming for 16 years that this day would come. We have to fix the problem. Tell the President, the Governor, and the Congress that it needs to be fixed now. This warrants immediate attention," said Birmingham.

"In 2006 there was 2.6 million acre-feet of spill out of Shasta [Reservoir], due to flood releases. We need more storage and conveyance," he added.

Riverdale area diversified farmer Mark Borba also called for stronger leadership, especially on the part of the Governor, to bring about additional storage and conveyance facilities for the long-term sustainability of the Valley's agriculture and jobs.

"It's not just the farmers who are affected," said Borba. "It's the people out there trying to put food on their families' tables. What happens to them when we let our 2008 crops go and not plant in 2009? What happens to their jobs?" he asked.

**Fresno County Farm Bureau, 1274 W. Hedges - Fresno, California 93728**

PH. (559) 237-0263 :: FAX (559) 237-3396 | **Contact The Farm Bureau**

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# Attachment D

## T&S Ramirez Farms

2170 Enrico Avenue  
Firebaugh, CA 93622  
(559)659-1052

June 8, 2008

Dear Supervisor Phil Larson:

I am writing you in regards to the water crisis faced by not only Westlands Water District but also other water districts that receive water from the Bureau of Water Reclamation.

My husband and I farm on the westside of Fresno. Some of the ground is in the Westlands Water District. We are fortunate enough to have access to a well on this ground but many of our neighbors do not.

We were prepared for the water shortage this year due in part to a drought and also to the ruling of federal Judge Wanger in protecting the delta smelt. His belief was that the pumps were causing the decline of the delta smelt so he ruled with the environmentalists. I could go on and on about some of the so-called environmentalist but I won't. The one thing I will say in that regard is that farmers are some of the best environmentalist or they wouldn't be able to grow crops on the same ground year to year. They protect this ground and take care of it.

Back to my message - a big part of the decline of the delta smelt and the salmon is due to the city of Sacramento. The Sanitation Department of Sacramento has been dumping treated water into the Sacramento River. This water contains ammonia. The ammonia in this water has been killing off the food source for these fish. Fish are like people--they need food to survive.

Many people have been complaining of the high cost of food. It will only get worse unless something positive happens.

In our small community of Firebaugh, 56 employees have already received pink slips and some growers have already begun to disk up crops. Many more will be laid off in the next few weeks if you do not take immediate action. First it's their jobs and next it will be their homes. What will we do then?

Please encourage Governor Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency. Ask him to turn the pumps on again. Farmers can survive with a 40% allocation;but we can't survive with the rationing. If immediate action isn't taken our crops will burn up with this wind and with the oncoming heat.

Sincerely yours,



Sharon Ramirez