

Robert Silva
Mayor
City of Mendota
Monday July 21, 2008
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
Water and Power Sub Committee
“The Federal Response to the California Drought Emergency”

This summer’s drought in the San Joaquin Valley is being described as one of the worst summers ever.

Over the past 20 years, water allocations to farmers on the west side of Fresno County have been dramatically decreasing to the point where we are now at a 40% water allocation and have a rationing program in place that only allows for half of the water supply to be delivered during the summer months of June, July and August when water is needed the most. While this is partially due to the extremely dry spring, it has been equally impacted by the actions taken to protect the endangered species in the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta.

In an effort to alleviate some of the pressure from decreased water supply, high water consuming crops have been abandoned and replaced for less water intensive permanent crops that not only require less water to produce but also less man-power to maintain and harvest. From 1999-2001 over 100,000 acres of land were retired in Westland’s Water District following an effort by Westlands Water District to take land out of production to relieve a drainage problem that the Bureau of Reclamation failed to address, as well as trying to increase the water supply within the district to remaining productive lands. This resulted in thousands of farm worker jobs lost as the land went fallow.

The long term impact the City of Mendota may eventually face is our community members abandoning their lives here to go find work elsewhere. Increasing gas and food prices, reducing numbers of available agricultural related jobs , as well as our home prices being some of the highest in the country are all factors contribution to the problem of attracting and retaining people in our region. Our economic development efforts are few and far between as most companies are weary of bringing a new business into a drought afflicted area with an increasing number of crimes as well as a lacking skilled labor pool.

The City of Mendota is plagued with an above average unemployment rate of 23.7% with peak unemployment levels reaching 30.3% (in March 2008). These statistics only account for those documented workers in Mendota. City Officials estimate that if undocumented workers were included in the count, the number would near 50%. By simply driving the streets of Mendota, the lack of available work is clearly demonstrated as the number of people congregating outside has dramatically increased.

As families depart nearby communities in search of work, school enrollment in those districts decrease, forcing lay-offs and funding cuts for the district. With less job security and available sources of income there is added pressure and tension placed on families. As these tensions rise, so do behavioral problems within our schools. For example, the Mendota Unified School District reported a dramatic increase in district-wide expulsions, jumping from 4 in the 2005-2006 school year to 30 in the 2006-2007 school year and maintain a high number through the current academic year.

Mendota crime statistics for the past 7 months indicate a grim 2% average growth rate in property crimes along with a 3% average growth rate in adult arrests within the City of Mendota. As a member of the grocery industry, our store has been increasingly targeted by criminals because people don't have money to buy food for their families.

In order to provide some level of relief, the City of Mendota along with charitable organizations have orchestrated 2 food give-aways to date, for which we have marketed solely through same day word-of-mouth. People began lining up 2 hours before the food give-away, and we went through 3 pallets of donated food in 90 minutes. The City along with multiple partners both private and non-profit, are organizing a third food give-away next week.

Solutions:

One solution that will provide jobs for our constituency is ensuring that the activation funds for the Federal Correctional Institution Mendota go through because the facility will make available 350 jobs to our residents, as well as those in surrounding communities.

Pressuring State legislators to adopt a comprehensive water plan. The water related issues plaguing our Central Valley are not unique to our area, they are afflicting the entire State of California. We cannot afford to wait another quarter century before taking action to address our water needs.

In the long-term, the federal government needs to revisit their policies when it comes to endangered species. Most-often cities are not the ones making policy in terms of water issues but they bear the brunt of its impact. The federal government needs to consider finding an alternative method of protecting the endangered species be it by building a habitat and relocating said species so that they may grow their population back to adequate numbers, or by finding another habitat that will be suitable for their prosperous existence. All in all there should be an equal balance of protecting the environment and endangered species while not jeopardizing our own citizens health, livelihood, and economic vitality.

At the July 8, 2008 regular City Council Meeting, the Mendota City Council adopted Resolution No. 08-30 in the matter of mitigating the needs of the City of Mendota residents as a result of the Governors Emergency Drought Declaration. Said Resolution is provided and labeled as Exhibit "A".

Exhibit "B" is a copy of a current article by Dennis Pollock and Robert Rodriguez of the *Fresno Bee* displaying testimonials offered to our State Assembly Members at a recent Public Hearing.

On behalf of the City of Mendota, I sincerely thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule and to meet with us and to hear our testimonials as the effects of the continuing water issues and recent drought that are afflicting our region and constituencies.

EXHIBIT "A"

BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF MENDOTA, COUNTY OF FRESNO

**A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY COUNCIL
OF THE CITY OF MENDOTA IN THE MATTER
OF MITIGATING THE NEEDS OF CITY OF
MENDOTA RESIDENTS AS A RESULT OF THE
EMERGENCY DECLARATION.**

RESOLUTION NO. 08-30

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

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

WHEREAS, water storage in many of the reservoirs serving the Central Valley are far below normal, including the San Luis reservoir which is at 53 percent of capacity, Lake Shasta at 61 percent of capacity, and Lake Oroville at just 50 percent of capacity; and

WHEREAS, diversions from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta for the State Water Project (SWP) and federal Central Valley Project (CVP) are being greatly restricted due to various factors including federal court actions to protect fish species, resulting in estimated SWP deliveries of only 35 percent, and CVP deliveries of only 40 percent, of local agencies' requested amounts for 2008; and

WHEREAS, the United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) recently announced an unexpected reduction in its water supply allocations to Central Valley Project (CVP) contractors within the San Luis Delta Mendota Water Agency Service Area from 45 percent to 40 percent; and

WHEREAS, this unanticipated reduction will result in crop loss, increased unemployment and other direct and indirect economic impacts to Central Valley counties; and

WHEREAS, dry conditions have created a situation of extreme fire danger in California, and these conditions resulted in devastating fires last year, with wildfires causing millions of dollars in damages; and

WHEREAS, San Joaquin Valley agriculture constitutes a \$20 billion industry, and serves as an essential part of California's economy; and

WHEREAS, the lack of water will cause devastating harm to our community which relies on this important industry, as growers lack sufficient water to finish the growing season, are forced to abandon planted crops, and are forced to dismiss workers; and

WHEREAS, the lack of water is causing agricultural workers in the Central Valley to lose their jobs, resulting in a loss of livelihood, an inability to provide for their families, and increased negative social and economic impacts on the communities that depend on them; and

WHEREAS, San Joaquin Valley agricultural production and processing industries account for almost 40 percent of regional employment, and every dollar produced on the farm generates more than three dollars in the local and regional economies, and the loss of these dollars is devastating communities; and

WHEREAS, as workers lose their jobs because of the lack of water, they often move their families away from the communities, resulting in further harm to local economies, lower enrollments in local schools and reduced funding for schools; and

WHEREAS, on June 4, 2008, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of the State of California, issued an Executive Order proclaiming a statewide drought, and pledged to proclaim a state of emergency in any county where emergency conditions exist due to the drought, in an effort to protect the people and property of California, including the businesses, workers and communities that depend on water deliveries for their livelihood and survival; and

WHEREAS, on June 6, 2008, at a Special Meeting of Fresno County Board of Supervisors, resolution was passed declaring a local state of emergency due to the severe drought conditions, and requested that the Governor proclaim the County of Fresno to be a state of emergency as well as request a Presidential Declaration; and

WHEREAS, on June 12, 2008, June 4, 2008, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of the State of California, proclaimed a state of emergency within the counties of Sacramento, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern Counties; and

WHEREAS, the City of Mendota supports the emergency drought declaration of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Governor of the State of California, and the County of Fresno to mitigate the negative economic and quality of life impacts.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the City Council of the City of Mendota, State of California, as a result of the emergency drought declaration, will work to collaborate with State and local agencies to find resources to assist and connect local residents and families with non-financial direct assistance so that that livelihood of residents of the City of Mendota may be sustained.

Robert Silva, Mayor

ATTEST:

I, Krystal M. Chojnacki, City Clerk of the City of Mendota, do hereby certify that the foregoing resolution was duly adopted and passed by the City Council at a regular meeting of said Council, held at the Mendota City Hall on the 8th day of July, 2008, by the following vote:

AYES: 5 – Mayor Silva, Mayor Pro Tem Amador, Council Members
Covarrubia, Capuchino and Riofrio.
NOES: 0
ABSENT: 0
ABSTAIN: 0

Krystal M. Chojnacki, City Clerk

EXHIBIT “B”

The ripple effect

The state's water crisis is taking a withering toll on life on the Valley's west side.

By Dennis Pollock and Robert Rodriguez / The Fresno Bee

07/05/08 21:50:38

[MORE INFORMATION](#)

If you go

What: Public hearing on the water shortage's effect on west-side employment, focusing on farmworker testimony and recommendations on how to help

Who: Assembly Member Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, and Mendota Mayor Robert Silva will take part

When: 4-5:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Mendota High School, 115 McCabe Ave.

Life on the Valley's west side may be withering along with crops that farmers have left to die.

Hundreds of farmworkers already have lost their jobs as growers idled or abandoned crops because of severe water shortages. Hundreds more will lose work because of crops that won't be planted this autumn.

Signs of trouble are everywhere:

The Spreckels Sugar plant in Mendota, a fixture since 1963, will close in September unless a grower cooperative can salvage it. Closure would mean 200 jobs lost.

Fordel, a major grower-packer-shipper of melons and other produce, is selling its Mendota facility after more than two decades. It is not harvesting or packing a crop this year. City officials say the company accounted for as many as 500 growing and packing jobs.

St. Joseph's School in Firebaugh is closing this month after more than 40 years, a casualty of declining enrollment and a shrinking pool of farmers able to give money.

Weather and pest challenges, along with abandoned acreage, are cutting processing-tomato production for Fresno County, the state's top grower, by as much as 400,000 tons. In 2006, the last year for which figures are available, farmers in Fresno County produced 4.4 million tons of processing tomatoes valued at \$248 million. This year's cut will mean shorter hours of plant operation and less work for truckers.

Thousands of acres of cotton are being abandoned at a time when planted upland cotton acreage already was at its lowest level on record. In addition, windy weather and roller-coaster temperatures have taken their toll.

Enrollment continues to drop in the Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District. That means shrinking attendance funding from the state.

At the root of it all is the state's water crisis.

"Unless we deal with a way to reliably convey water from north to south, there will be no way to keep alive this agricultural marvel of the world," says Riverdale grower Mark Borba.

Several farmworkers gather beneath the shade of a young tree outside a Mendota laundry.

They talk about the grim economy and their hopes for a better future.

Rigoberto Fajardo is working just two to three days a week, weeding tomato and melon fields.

Like many in the Mendota and Firebaugh areas, the workers hope the season's upcoming cantaloupe harvest will bring them steady work.

"They tell us that there isn't as much work right now because the farmers don't have enough water," Fajardo says. "But how are we supposed to live? We barely have enough money to pay our bills or send money home to our families."

Fajardo and Jose Lopez say they've thought about returning to Mexico. Each has worked in the Valley's fields for several years.

"You want to believe that things will get better, that the melon season will bring us good fortune," Lopez says. "But we just don't know right now. All we can do is hope that things get better."

Many fear it will get worse.

Sarah Woolf, a spokeswoman for the Westlands Water District, says at least 200 farmworker jobs have been lost in that district already.

She says another 300 jobs will not be filled this autumn because growers, lacking water, will cut back on planting.

In Firebaugh, it's quiet inside Xavier & Sariah's Styles, a men's and women's contemporary clothing store. Manager Xavier Rivera is relaxing on a sofa watching television. Foot traffic is slow, real slow.

"Business used to be good a few years ago," Rivera says. "I would go down to L.A. to pick up clothes every week. But now, we sometimes make just enough money to keep the lights on. It's crazy."

Rivera estimates his sales have dropped about 65% in the past two years.

"It all started with rising gas prices, and it didn't get any better after that," Rivera says.

Michael Santos, general manager for Westside Ford Lincoln Mercury in Firebaugh, says the cost of gas has cut into his sales, which are down 50%.

"But that wouldn't stop a farmer from buying a truck," says Santos, whose dealership's slogan is testament to the farmers and workers who buy his vehicles: "No suits, no ties, no lies."

"For them, the water is the factor," he says.

Water always has been a factor in the Westlands district.

It's a reason that only 300,000 acres are being farmed in a district where 500,000 could be. From 1999 to 2001, 100,000 acres were retired.

Less farmland has meant fewer workers, and that has cut into school enrollments.

Sean Howard, a farmer and board member for the Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District, says enrollments have dropped "the past couple years, all related to the water crisis. This year, it's horrendous."

Enrollments dropped by 92 students from the 2005-06 to 2006-07 school year, costing the district about \$500,000 in attendance funds from the state. Howard says for 2007-08, the drop was 32 students, resulting in a loss of \$190,000.

Enrollment drops took an even greater toll at St. Joseph's School, a parochial school for preschoolers to eighth grade that closed Tuesday.

At its peak, 250 children from Dos Palos, Firebaugh and Mendota attended the school; this year, only 84 attended.

The school relied on tuition and fundraising and served children from all income levels.

Much of the funding came from farmers who found themselves unable to contribute as much as they had in past years.

Don Teixeira, part of a farming family and school board president, says the decision to close was "just heartbreaking. It was very emotional for everybody on the board and for the parents."

The decline in jobs also has spawned social problems.

"It's going to really be tough this winter when the unemployment runs out," says Miguel Arias, president of the board for Mendota Unified School District.

The city's low-income housing is drawing unemployed families from nearby communities, causing enrollment in Mendota to rise. With it come stresses. One example: Two years ago, the district had four expulsions. Last year there were 35.

"The bad part about what is going on is that even though we are seeing increases and getting some additional funding from students who used to be in Firebaugh and Golden Plains," Arias says, "these folks are not bringing in sales tax or property tax that allow us to build new facilities."

Worse, says Mendota Mayor Robert Silva, "some families are becoming dysfunctional." There are more reports of domestic abuse, shoplifting and theft of pharmaceuticals, some of it at the Mendota Food Center he manages.

Josie Munoz of Mendota says thugs recently robbed her husband, Pablo, of his \$600 paycheck. They hit him on the head with a baseball bat as he was walking home.

"I have never seen it like this before," Josie says. "I think some people are getting desperate. There just isn't as much work as there used to be."

Pablo is working two or three hours less a day weeding tomato fields just west of the city.

"I tell him maybe we should leave, maybe he should get another job, but he likes what he does, he loves working in the outdoors," Josie says. "But me, I'm worried."

Joe Gomez Jr. also is worried. His family-owned Western Auto Store in Mendota, open since 1969, is like many small mom-and-pop businesses in the city that have struggled to stay afloat.

Western Auto still supplies nuts, bolts and spark plugs, but big sellers now are locking gas caps.

"People are stealing other people's gas," Gomez says. "It's rough."

Gomez has managed to outlast a few of his competitors and his sales are stable.

But for how long, he is not sure.

Amarpreet "Ruby" Dhaliwal, mayor of San Joaquin, notices a difference at the D's Minimart he owns.

It's a matter of change.

He doesn't have to get change from the banks now. More people are using change to make their purchases.

"They're breaking their piggy banks," Dhaliwal says.

At Ramon's Tire & Wheel in Mendota, owner Ramon Gonzalez has seen his sales drop 35% in the past several years.

Gonzalez, who came to the United States from Mexico in 1978, built his business from the ground up after working out of his home, sometimes going out to fix tires in the fields at 3 in the morning.

He now employs eight workers and worries if he will have enough business to keep everyone on the payroll.

At one time, his service trucks were running nearly nonstop providing tires and repairs to the region's biggest ranchers. But Gonzalez lost some of those big contracts.

They dried up, like some of the farms.

"Everything has changed," he says. "And we've had to change, too."

These days, Gonzalez still sells tires for passenger cars and tractors, but he also provides wheel alignments, lube, oil and filter changes and car detailing. He will soon be adding auto parts and doing front-end alignments for big rigs.

He also seldom leaves the shop, working seven days a week.

"I want to be here for my customers, especially if they have a problem," Gonzalez says. "The way things are, we can't afford to lose any business. You just don't know what is going to happen."

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