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*Rural California Report* is a quarterly publication of the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS), whose mission is to work toward sustainable rural communities. A sustainable rural community is one that is socially just, economically viable and ecologically balanced. To achieve this goal, we conduct policy research that takes an integrated approach to issues affecting rural communities, rural economies and rural environments, with a primary focus on agricultural labor markets.

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# Villarejo to Retire after 22 Years as CIRS Executive Director

## Interview with CIRS Co-Founder and Executive Director

After twenty-two years as Executive Director of the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS), Don Villarejo will retire effective June 30, 1999. Incorporated in 1977, CIRS has made unparalleled contributions to the scholarship of rural California through its research on farm labor, pesticide and water issues, particularly in California's Central Valley.

As CIRS co-founder and its first executive director, Villarejo has been instrumental in sustaining both the integrity of CIRS research and the financial strength of the institute. In the last year alone, Villarejo has secured close to \$1 million in grants covering some of the most pressing issues facing rural California: the health status of our hired farm workers, the future of rural communities dependent upon increasingly insecure water supplies, and the changing face of rural California given the increasing demand for foreign-born agricultural workers.

On a recent Friday afternoon, a few CIRS staff members cornered Villarejo in CIRS's library and asked him to reflect on the history and important issues of CIRS. The following is a transcription of the interview.

## What do you regard as CIRS's greatest accomplishments?

CIRS has established itself as one of the foremost think tanks in collaborative relationships with community and activist organizations in California. This is based on the accomplishment of balancing the need for objective research, on the

one hand, and, on the other hand, working closely enough the community, so that we are always sensitive to the current issues that affect folks in the community.

And the work around mechanization that we got our start with is an example of that. In 1976-77, an electronic eye, color sorting, tomato harvest machine was introduced. The effect of this technology on labor was significant. Crews of 16-20 tomato workers were reduced to crews of 5-6 workers per tomato harvest machine. So there was like a 75-80 percent reduction in jobs in the processing tomato industry in this state, particularly around Yolo County.

## Pesticide Issues

After the mechanization issue came a focus on pesticides. We were among the first to really break-through on the pesticide issue, recognizing that it's something that affects farmers, farm workers, consumers and even urban residents in many different ways and at different levels of risk.

Seeing that these constituents actually have a lot in common was an important accomplishment of CIRS, in collaboration with the predecessor organization to CAFF (Community Alliance with Family Farmers), at that time called the California Agrarian Action Project (CAAP).

We created slide-shows, training materials. We trained organizers in Bakersfield, Fresno, Monterey County, Butte County, the Sacramento Valley area and even up on the north coast, along the way building relationships with grass-roots activists.

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This collaboration with rural communities really helped bring pesticide issues to the forefront in California.

*Reclamation Law*

In the mid 1980s we conducted a fair amount of work around the Reclamation issue that was funded by the Ford Foundation. That work had a significant impact on the enforcement of Reclamation Law, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley. Reclamation law was originally intended to limit the benefit of Federal Irrigation Programs to farms of 160 acres or less. In 1982, that limit was extended to farms of 960 acres or less.

We studied the degree to which there was compliance with that 960-acre requirement and found significant variance. We ended up testifying before congress, twice, to give expert testimony on the degree of compliance with Reclamation Law. This was one of the great small farm issues in history of California agriculture.

That work on the Reclamation issue set the foundation for our current water policy, which seeks to protect water supplies to rural California given growing competition for water from urban and environmental interests.

*Into the Fields*

In the late 1980s, a significant change in our work happened when we embarked on the Farm Labor and Rural Poverty project. This brought us into the field, directly talking with workers. Much of the prior work had been based on primary records found in public record sources or in secondary sources of one sort or another. But to actually go out and generate primary data ourselves, in the field on a first-hand basis...I think is the real major shift in how we did work here at CIRS.

Bringing in an excellent team of young scholars, Dave Runsten, Carol Zabin and, later, Bonnie Bade, Rafael Alarcon and several others was a terrific moment in our history. Recognition also has to be given to Louis Magaña. We wanted to create a position for an outreach worker, who came from the farm worker community, as someone both to keep us informed of what was happening in farm worker communities and to



**CIRS Executive Director Don Villaerjo**

inform communities of our work.

Hiring Magaña was a real eye-opener. Most of what I know about farm labor in this state I learned because of the access to communities that Magaña provided. He was an excellent teacher to me of what was going on. That was a real education for me. I probably learned more from that experience than any other single activity here at CIRS.

In the end, much of the work Magaña accomplished is not something that's going to get recorded anywhere. He excelled at providing

assistance to individuals. He was a social worker, a caseworker as well as a leader.

This work brought to attention issues that we otherwise wouldn't have looked at. One great example is when Magaña learned of the accidental deaths of three irrigation workers in a field near Linden who had been electrocuted while moving irrigation pipe in the field. When we let the media know about this, Jon Carroll of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote about it and suggested to his readers that contributions to the families be made to a special fund that CIRS created for this purpose.

Something over \$5,000 came in, in small donations, from all over Northern California. These funds were brought personally by Magaña to the worker's families in Michoacan, Mexico. There was a feeling created that there are people in the North, in the United States, in California who really cared about what happened in this accident.

The three who died were undocumented. They'd only been in the United States a few days, this was their first job and they had this horrible accident. The outpouring of generosity was really positive. It's one of those things that makes me smile when I get up to go to work in the morning.

*More Than Just a Newsletter*

Another thing that happened during the early years of the Farm Labor and Rural Poverty project was starting publication of the quarterly *Rural California Report*.

I think we made a wise choice in how to go about producing *RCR*. Most organizational newsletters are, frankly, self-promotion of the activities and personnel of the organization sponsoring the newsletter.

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We chose not to follow that path. We chose instead to find very able, young writers, good thinkers, people with knowledge of rural issues and basically turn them loose to create a newsletter that's a kind of policy briefing and research report on issues facing rural California. A lot of the information reported in *RCR* is not reported elsewhere.

*Organic Cotton*

A number of other important accomplishments occurred in programs that were started in the early 1990s. The work done by Will Allen in creating the Sustainable Cotton Project had its origins in a Cotton Project begun here at CIRS with the advice of Joyce Johnston, Judith Redmond and others.

Our goal was to bring to light agricultural commodities that turn out to be enormous users of agricultural chemicals, but are not normally

*Piece of Land*, as well as the photo essay of Central Valley agriculture by Bill Gillette, now displayed on the walls of our office.

*A Safe Agricultural Workplace*

The next big accomplishment was the development of a program around agricultural health and safety issues, in collaboration with the Agricultural Health and Safety Center at UC Davis. The leader of that program, Dr. Mark Schenker, has been very helpful in this regard.

This work brought us into areas I had no idea we would ever get into. Things like collaborating with the State Labor Commissioner, with investigators from the U.S. Dept. of Labor and with Cal OHSA to provide information they needed to do a better job of enforcement, on the one hand, and, on the other, making available to us data about enforcement activities that really helped us understand how enforcement relates to improving the

*A Training Ground*

I've mentioned just a few of our notable accomplishments. The real major accomplishment of CIRS is the creation of an on-going institution dedicated to serving rural people in this state, that seeks to be objective and to look across different occupational lines, different cultures, different value systems.

Even though we are not part of an academic institution, there have been a number of young folks who have either been supported through research fellowships or worked here for a period of time, learned the subject well, and then went on to pursue advanced degrees. CIRS is a training ground, then, for another generation of scholars who will make valuable contributions to the scholarship of rural California.

**CIRS began its work in 1977 in part because of a perception that the University of California was neglecting important issues in rural California. Is this still the case?**

The original design of the Land Grant University System to serve the rural poor is a good design. What has happened, of course, is that states like California, that were mostly rural, are now, in terms of population, mostly urban. And so the shift to urban concerns is one of the most prominent aspects of how the Land Grant System has changed over the years.

To a great degree, the service to rural communities has disappeared. This is clear from the fact that hired workers in our state's expanding and profitable agricultural industry are very poorly represented in any of the concerns in the Land Grant System.

It's really a catastrophe that the University of California, with all of its resources, has no significant program devoted to exploring and understanding the concerns of hired farm work-

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thought of in terms of pesticide problems since consumers don't directly purchase cotton from fields, as with fruit and vegetable commodities for example. Recognizing the cotton industry as a major users of agricultural chemicals and the possible health implications of that was a very important step in CIRS's history.

Another important project at that time was the Agriculture and the Common Good Project, organized by by Trudy Wischemann. Trudy brought together the interests of small farmers, farm workers and townspeople in rural California communities. The legacy of that project is in her book, *A Little*

health and safety of agricultural workers, farmers and farm workers alike.

That initial work was an important precursor to our current project, funded by The California Endowment, in which we are interviewing and providing physical exams to 1200 hired farm workers throughout the state. This is a rare attempt to gather cross-sectional, baseline data on the health status of California's hired farm workers. We're also seeking to document hired farm worker's access to health care and social services.

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ers. It's not in Coop Extension, it's not in the Agricultural Experiment Stations, it's not in any of the academic departments. There's just a paucity of work devoted to rural California communities.

Today nearly 90 percent of all the farm labor in California is done by hired workers. Farmers contribute 10 to 15 percent, tops, of the labor. This wasn't true when the Land Grant System began. At that time, farmers contributed most of the labor. But today most of the labor is contributed by hired workers. That change is not reflected in anyway in the mission of the University of California under the Land Grant System.

I would argue that the original mission of serving the rural poor ought to be carried out and that the rural poor today includes a very high proportion of hired workers. The University of California has shown little indication of a willingness to serve that constituency.

**CIRS has dealt extensively over the last 22 years on both small farm and hired farm worker issues. How are these issues related?**

Ben Maddock, the third Vice-President of the United Farm Workers, once told me that in private conversation Cesar Chavez said that small-scale family farmers are really not any different from hired farm workers, except that they're self-employed. Essentially what they do is very similar tasks. They drive tractors, they hoe and weed, they do manual labor and they do it for by and large a pretty low-wage, if you figure it out. And the only difference is that the small farmer is self-employed.

I thought that was really interesting. What Cesar Chavez himself recognized is that farm work is essentially manual labor and that the kind of occupational injury exposures, the kind

of risks, the kind of work hours and so forth faced by farm workers is really the same faced by small-scale family farmers. That's really important to recognize.

Another thing worth thinking about is that most small-scale farmers these days in California are producing labor-intensive crops. Even those who are pioneering sustainable practices and figuring

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how to insure a healthy rural society and farm system—even these folks often depend heavily on hired labor.

And so you have this interesting phenomenon of organic production and other sustainable farming practices that rely heavily on farm labor. That's just in the nature of labor-intensive agriculture. But I would argue that those farmers who are righteous in terms of the environment need to become righteous in terms of labor.

I don't know how to help make this happen. I recall having a conversation with a small farmer friend of mine, who said to me, "I'm doing the best I can in terms of environmental responsibility, but it's a hell of a lot to ask me to be socially responsible also. I can do one out of two. I can't do two out of two."

I understand that. I can sympathize with that. But I don't want to give up. I think it's still possible to be environmentally responsible and also treat workers fairly. Bringing together farm labor and environmental interests is one the great challenges facing rural California.

**What will you miss most about being CIRS Executive Director? What will you miss least?**

What I will miss most is the staff, the relationships we have in doing our work here. I remember when Susan Sherry, who was on our board, came and visited us once and said, "You guys have created your own little world over here with your own rules." That's exactly right. There's a basis

of respect among the staff here. Everyone here is learning. It's really an exciting place to be. The atmosphere is very special and I will miss it.

What will I miss least? I will miss least administrative work, for which I have very little talent. Fund raising, personnel, grant reporting, all that kind of stuff—the kind of stuff that is really essential to running an organization, but is really time consuming and, for me, difficult to do—I will not miss that.

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*In retirement, Villarejo says he will spend a lot of time with his grandson, Zachary. He also plans to travel, garden and take dance lessons with his wife, Merna, who is also retiring in July.*

*After an extensive nationwide search, the CIRS Search Committee selected David Lighthall, Ph.D. as the new Executive Director of the California Institute for Rural Studies, effective July 1, 1999. Lighthall comes to CIRS from Colgate University and will be featured in the next issue of Rural California Report.*

