

Statement by Dr. Don Villarejo
Release of the Report *Jobless After a Man-Made Drought*
August 31, 2004
Fresno

Currently, the Westlands Water District web site describes its plans to permanently retire a large portion of its cropland as follows:

“The Westlands Water District is actively pursuing land retirement as a means to address a chronic shortage of Central Valley Project (CVP) water supplies and long standing drainage issues. Westlands’ goal is to eventually reduce the total number of acres irrigated with CVP water from approximately 570,000 acres to 370,000 acres – a total reduction of some 200,000 acres.”

Source: <http://www.westlandswater.org/wwd/retirement/20030506.pdf?title=Land%20Retirement%20in%20Westlands%20Water%20District>; August 26, 2004.

During the past twenty years, the communities of the Westside of the San Joaquin Valley, such as Firebaugh, Mendota and Huron, have repeatedly endured the harmful effects of layoffs and shutdowns caused by temporary reductions in agricultural production. In nearly all of these instances, natural calamities, such as the six-year drought from 1987 through 1992, or, more recently, flood and freeze, have temporarily left hundreds of residents without work. Westside communities and local businesses have, in turn, been squeezed when the paychecks disappeared.

Today, I want to direct your attention to the latest events that have impacted these communities and local businesses: the possible permanent retirement of thousands of acres of formerly productive Westside agricultural land. This large-scale fallowing of land, and the cutbacks in employment that have already occurred, are the direct result of human actions, not the whims of nature.

Throughout California we are now witnessing the consequences of a major policy shift concerning our natural resources: water that had formerly been devoted to agricultural production is being diverted to cities and to environmental concerns. On the Westside, when the water is taken away and land is fallowed, communities suffer.

The report being released today, *Jobless After a Man-Made Drought*, carefully examines reductions in agricultural production in the Westlands Water District that have already occurred. Detailed records of farm production and land use during the period 1998-2000 were compared with records for 2001-2003.

The principal findings are:

- The average amount of fallowed land in the Westlands Water District during the three-year period 2001-2003 was 81,671 acres, more than doubling the average amount fallowed during 1998-2000.
- The annual loss of farm income that resulted from the increase of fallowed acreage during the period 2001-2003 is estimated to be \$60.0 million.
- Eighteen District farm operations active during the 2000 crop year and with land later earmarked for possible retirement had totally closed down by 2003.

- Forty-five District farm operations active during the 2003 crop year and with land slated for possible retirement at a later date may be at risk for permanent closure.
- Approximately 750 hired farm workers on District farms lost their jobs as a direct result of the doubling of fallowed acreage during the period 2001-2003.
- Reductions in farm employment associated with the doubling of fallowed acreage during the period 2001-2003 has resulted in an annual loss of an estimated \$6 million of hired farm worker wages.
- The annual community economic loss that is likely associated with land fallowing
 - reductions of gross farm income, hired worker wages, and farm input purchases
 - is estimated to be \$88 million.

No additional, special assistance is being provided to the people, local businesses and communities that have experienced economic loss.

The new environmental ethic that serves as the basis for reducing irrigation water supplies and devoting it to other purposes has yet to consider the human effects of those decisions. Unlike “plant closures” of factories or the cutback of logging on federal land, there has been far too little attention to the impact of “land closures” on the hired workers and local business people whose communities have been impacted.