OPINION

Thanks, Don Villarejo

Rural researcher helped shape Central Valley policies

The Central Valley today is losing a remarkable researcher whose objective, community-based style elevated rural policy debates to a higher level. Don Villarejo came to Davis 22 years ago and created the California Institute for Rural Studies. His goal was to create an independent think tank focused on the farm labor, pesticide and water issues of the Central Valley. He succeeded, and then some. Now, with an 11-person staff and roughly \$1 million in ongoing research projects, CIRS is an invaluable Valley institution. While Villarejo retires as of today, CIRS lives on. So, we hope, does Villarejo's data-driven approach toward solving the Valley's most complex political, economic and social problems.

A brief visit to the institute's Web site

(www.cirsinc.org) provides a glimpse of the vast warehouse of policy data that Villarejo has built. CIRS maintains field-by-field, cropby-crop information on 55,000 California farms. A separate pesticides database provides the unique ability to monitor pesticide use on a farm-by-farm basis. CIRS has created for the state government a database on the hiring practices of farm labor contractors, with more than 15,000 records.

Findings from data don't always conform to rigid ideologies that polarize rural politics. One example is how CIRS showed with data that redirecting water from the Central Valley would hurt thousands of farm workers as well as agribusiness. The example was the isolated farming community of Mendota in Fresno County. By analyzing virtually all government and business data available, CIRS in 1996 found how water shortages for agriculture caused unemployment in the Mendota zip code to soar to 41 percent while retail activity plunged 11 percent.

Villarejo leaves CIRS with a stable of promising young scholars and a new executive director, David Lighthall. So long as they continue to challenge policy-makers with the kind of data that CIRS has produced over the years, the Valley can afford, just maybe, to let

Villarejo retire.