

## Severe Drought Adds to Hardships in California



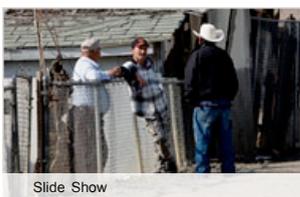
Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

A farmers'-market-style food handout at Valley Life Community Church in Selma, Calif., helps many families. [More Photos >](#)

By **JESSE MCKINLEY**  
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MENDOTA, Calif. — The country's biggest agricultural engine, [California's](#) sprawling Central Valley, is being battered by the recession like farmland most everywhere. But in an unlucky strike of nature, the downturn is being deepened by a severe drought that threatens to drive up joblessness, increase [food prices](#) and cripple farms and towns.

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[California Drought Drives up Joblessness](#)



Across the valley, towns are already seeing some of the worst unemployment in the country, with rates three and four times the national average, as well as reported increases in all manner of social ills: drug use, excessive drinking and rises in hunger and domestic violence.

With fewer checks to cash, even check-cashing businesses have failed, as have thrift stores, ice cream parlors and hardware shops. The state has put the 2008 drought losses at more than \$300 million, and economists predict that this year's losses could swell past \$2 billion, with as many as 80,000 jobs lost.

"People are saying, 'Are you a third world country?'" said Robert Silva, the mayor of Mendota, which has a 35 percent unemployment rate, up from the more typical seasonal average of about 20

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Mendota "is dying on the vine," its mayor lamented. [More Photos](#) »

percent. "My community is dying on the vine."

Even as rains have washed across some of the state this month, greening some arid rangeland, agriculture officials say the lack of rain and the prospect of minimal state and federal water supplies have already led many farmers to fallow fields and retreat into survival mode with low-maintenance and low-labor crops.

Last year, during the second year of the drought, more than 100,000 acres of the 4.7 million in the valley were left unplanted, and experts predict that number could soar to nearly 850,000 acres this year.

All of which could mean shorter supplies and higher prices in produce aisles — California is the nation's biggest producer of tomatoes, almonds, avocados, grapes, artichokes, onions, lettuce, olives and dozens of other crops — and increased desperation for people like Agustin Martinez, a 20-year veteran of the fields who

generally makes \$8 an hour picking fruit and pruning.

"If I don't have work, I don't live," said Mr. Martinez, a 39-year-old father of three who was waiting in a food line in Selma, southeast of Fresno. "And all the work is gone."

In Mendota, the self-described cantaloupe center of the world, a walk through town reveals young men in cowboy hats loitering, awaiting the vans that take workers to the fields. None arrive.

The city's main drag has a few quiet businesses — a boxing gym, a liquor store — and tellingly, two busy pool halls. The owner of one hall, Joseph R. Riofrio, said that his family had also long owned a grocery and check-cashing business in town, but that he had just converted to renting movies, figuring that people would rather stay at home in hard times.

"We're not going to give up," Mr. Riofrio said. "But people are doing bad."

Just down the highway in Firebaugh, José A. Ramírez, the city manager, said a half-dozen businesses in its commercial core had closed, decimating the tax base and leaving him to "tell the Little League they'd have to paint their own lines" on the local diamond.

The situation is particularly acute in towns along the valley's western side, where farmers learned on Friday that federal officials anticipate a "zero allocation" of water from the Central Valley Project, the huge New Deal system of canals and reservoirs that irrigates three million acres of farmland. If the estimate holds and springtime remains dry, it would be first time ever that farmers faced a season-long cutoff from federal waters.

"Farmers are very resilient, we make things happen, but we've never had a zero allocation," said Stephen Patricio, president of Westside Produce, a melon handler and harvester. "And I might not be very good at math, but zero means zero."

While California has suffered severe dry spells before, including a three-year stint ending in 1977 and a five-year drought in the late '80s and early '90s, the ill effects now are compounded by the recession and other factors.

Federal, state and local officials paint a grim picture of a system taxed as it has never been before by a growing population, environmental concerns and a labyrinth of water supply contracts and agreements, some dating to the early 20th century. In addition to the federal water supplies, farmers can irrigate with water provided by the state authorities, drawn from wells and bought or transferred from other farmers. Such water may not always be the best quality, said Mark Borba, a fourth-generation farmer in Huron, Calif.

"But it's wet," he said.

Richard Howitt, the chairman of the agricultural and resource economics department at the University of California, Davis, estimates that 60,000 to 80,000 jobs could be lost — including in ancillary businesses — and that as much as \$2.2 billion in crop and other losses could be caused by restrictions on water and the drought, which he called "hydrologically as bad as 1977 and economically as bad as 1991."

“You’re talking about field workers, processing handlers, people packing melons, trucking hay, sprayers, people selling tractors, people selling lunches to people selling tractors,” Mr. Howitt said. “And in some of these small west-side towns, it’s going to hit the people who are least able to adapt to it.”

One of the hardest hit areas is the farmland served by the Westlands Water District, which receives water exclusively from the Central Valley Project and distributes it to 600,000 acres in Fresno and Kings Counties. Sarah Woolf, a spokeswoman for the district, said that her 700 members expected to leave 300,000 to 400,000 acres fallow and that some might not come back to farm at all.

“Everyone’s trying to go down fighting,” Ms. Woolf said. “But there will be significant companies that will go out of business, as well as families that have been farming for generations, if it doesn’t get better.”

The outlook for things getting better quickly is dim, despite forecasts of rain this week. Last month, California officials estimated the snowpack in the Sierra, a primary source of water for the state when it melts in the spring, at 61 percent of normal. On Friday, the State Department of Water Resources said it would deliver just 15 percent of its promised contracts, a level it was able to maintain only because of the recent spate of rain. “It’s pathetic,” said Lester A. Snow, the department’s director.

Lynette Wirth, a spokeswoman for the United States Bureau of Reclamation, said water levels in all federally managed reservoirs in California were well below normal, with “abysmal” carryover from the previous year.

“There’s been no meaningful precipitation since last March,” Ms. Wirth said.

Farmers, of course, are also dealing with issues unrelated to rain, including tight credit from banks and recent court decisions meant to protect fish that have limited the transfer of water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which feeds snowmelt to farmbound canals. Many farmers refer to a “man-made drought” caused by restrictions.

At the same time, environmental groups say they also fear a range of potential problems, including depletion of the valley aquifer from well pumping, possible dust-bowl conditions in areas of large patches of fallow ground and concern about salmon and other species. “It’s a tough year for the environment, and people,” said Doug Obegi, a lawyer with the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#).

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