

Statement of Mr. George Delgado

Before the House Natural Resources Committee Field Hearing

"California Water Crisis and Its Impacts: The Need for Immediate and Long-Term Solutions"

March 19, 2014

Chairman Hastings and members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to come here to testify before you today on one of the most important issues facing my community.

My name is George Delgado. I have lived on the Westside of the Central Valley all my life in Firebaugh, western Fresno County. I attended local schools in Firebaugh, California and completed my education at Fresno State University earning a degree in Agricultural Science.

My experiences in agriculture on the Westside go back to well before I started my first farm. As a young man, I picked cotton and tomatoes and chopped weeds by hand. Working summers and on weekends in the fields for Westside farmers gave me the opportunity to work as I attended school and helped me earn the money I needed to complete my education. My career as a farmer started in 1978 when I leased my first field near Firebaugh. Later, I leased an additional 300 acres on the historic Sam Hamburg Ranch, first cultivated in 1936. Presently, I own and farm almonds, cherries, and cantaloupes in Westlands Water District, San Luis Water District and Pacheco Water District, all of which receive their water from the federal Central Valley Project.

The hub of California's Central Valley Project is the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Here, water from reservoirs in the northern portions of the Central Valley and State Water projects is conveyed through natural channels to pumps that feed the man-made canals and aqueducts that carry water to the Westside and down toward the southern portions of our state. Unfortunately, using the Delta's natural channels to convey water through the system has shown itself to be the equivalent of using an unimproved dirt road as an interchange on our federal interstate system and it has imposed significant challenges on the state's water systems.

Environmental statutes and litigation, brought largely by environmental special interests, have led to serious water conflicts in California. The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) has been the major environmental driver in water supply litigation. Of the over 1,300 species listed under the Endangered Species Act in the United States, over 300 are in the State of California. During the past ten years, trillions of gallons of water have been diverted away from human use to environmental purposes to "save" these species.

Recent litigation on protecting Delta smelt, a three-inch fish native to California's Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, has taken hundreds of thousands of acre feet away from our communities each year. Environmentalists have consistently blamed the Delta pumps as the cause for smelt population decline. Yet, they continue to ignore numerous other factors, including predation by nonnative fish such as the Striped Bass and the discharge of toxic sewage into the Delta, all of which have been shown to contribute significantly to smelt decline. Unfortunately, the Delta Smelt is not the only reason water has continued to be taken from the Valley.

When I started farming on the Westside, farmers could expect to receive 100% of their contracted water supplies year-in and year-out, except in years of the most extreme drought conditions. However, since the passage of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act of 1992, more than 1.2 million-acre feet of water annually – enough to irrigate over 340,000 acres of farmland - have been redirected away from irrigation to fish and wildlife uses. As a result, in an average water year, most farmers on the Westside expect to receive less than 40% of their allocation from year to year.

Agriculture in my part of the Valley has been devastated by the Central Valley Project Improvement Act. As farmers, we can accept natural droughts as a risk of our chosen profession but a drought caused by legislation that takes away our water is very difficult to understand. The Central Valley Project Improvement Act was enacted while California was experiencing the effects of a long-term drought and many of the provisions in the Act were aimed at conserving water, increasing the use of water transfers, and providing additional water for fish and wildlife purposes.

As someone who makes his living off the land, I am all too aware of the need for all of us to be good stewards of the earth. However, part of being a good steward is ensuring that scarce resources are allocated in the most efficient and effective means possible, striking careful balances. That means ensuring there is enough water available for both fish and families. The continued decline of threatened and endangered species in the state in the face of CVPIA's water reallocation has led me, and many others who make their livings on the Westside, to ask whether taking away our water for fish and wildlife has had a meaningful impact on our environment.

Growing up, I was taught that that the purpose of our government is to help farmworkers, those in agriculture related professions, and farmers as they struggle to grow America's vegetables, fruits, nuts and other food products. Those of us who farm in the Valley are proud to say we feed the world. However, the continued manmade drought has left many families in communities up and down the valley unable to feed themselves.

Here in the San Joaquin Valley, water equals jobs. In 2009 during the last water crisis, hundreds of thousands of acres were fallowed, leaving many thousands unemployed. Our communities saw unemployment rates reach well over 40% and crime rates hit record highs. Here, in the nation's food basket, many of our friends and neighbors were forced into food lines to receive Chinese produce.

Like many of my friends and neighbors, I am afraid the CVPIA is doing little more than legally stealing water from farmers. Here in the Central Valley, we work every day to conserve every drop of water that is delivered to us and protect our precious and quickly diminishing ground water resources so we can continue to feed the world. Although we are on the cutting edge of irrigation technology and we feed the world with the minimum water necessary, each year more water is taken from us to help clean up sewage, metals and chemicals dumped into the Sacramento River, San Joaquin River, the Delta, and San Francisco Bay by polluters who refuse to keep up with the times.

Much can be done to improve our situation here in the Central Valley. California's farmers cannot continue to give up their water for "environmental purposes". The Endangered Species Act must be reformed to strike a reasonable balance that puts families first and the

CVPIA has to be amended to help bring a compromise between the needs of wildlife, cities and food producers.

Thank you for the opportunity to come here today and share my story. Only a united Congress and President can work together to make these changes and enact legislation necessary to give short and long term drought relief to our communities. I hope you will take what you learn here today back to Washington and, working together, use it to help provide the relief our Valley needs.