

Statement of the Honorable Sylvia V. Chavez

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Before the House Natural Resources Committee Field Hearing

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

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Mr. Chairman and members of Congress, good morning and welcome to the Central Valley. Thank you for coming here today to learn about the impacts the drought is having on our communities. I hope that as you leave today you will take with you a better understanding that for many communities in the Central Valley water is jobs and water is life.

My name is Sylvia V. Chavez and I am the child of farm workers, as were my parents before me. As a child, I worked in the fields during my summer vacation from school to earn extra income. My mother and father worked in the fields out of necessity and survival to provide a better life for our family. Their hard work showed my eight siblings and me what work ethic is truly all about.

Today, I am the Mayor of the City of Huron, California. Huron has a population of just under 7,000 people and is located 60 miles south west of Fresno. Our population is 97% Hispanic. The majority of our residents are connected to agribusiness either directly or indirectly. Because our city is so far away from Fresno and the other population centers, many times we are forgotten. Yet, like many other small Valley towns, when it comes to putting food on the dinner table, it is communities like ours that fill our nation’s stomachs with many of the everyday foods Americans take for granted.

You see, my city, like many Valley towns, is surrounded by agriculture. Local farmers plant, irrigate, and harvest their crops with the help of Huron’s residents. Then, the people of Huron pack and transport Valley commodities to market. If you did not grow up in the Valley or have not traveled here before, you may be unaware that the lettuce and tomato in your garden salad or the toppings on your McDonalds hamburger burger come from right here in the San Joaquin Valley. Our region has been blessed with fertile farm land. What we grow is not simply transported to other parts of our nation. Our commodities are shipped across the globe. The next time you put sauce on your spaghetti, remember that 95 percent of the processing tomatoes in the United States are grown in Huron. Let’s face it, in Huron,

WE FEED THE WORLD!

As much as my community is tied to agriculture, we are equally tied to water. In 2009, when water allocations reached as low as 10%, Huron’s unemployment rate climbed to almost 40%. Businesses who normally hired as many as 3,500 farm workers in previous years needed less than 600 because of the drought. As a result of the 2009 drought, many in my community were forced into food lines just to feed their families. The drought we face today is by far more serious.

In fact, the drought we face today has put my community's ability to turn on its faucets in jeopardy. In the City of Huron, we purchase our water from the Bureau of Reclamation. This year we were notified that Huron will receive an allotment of only 649 acre feet for Fiscal Year 2014/15. For my city, whose historical usage is 1,125 acre feet per year, this year's allotment represents a shortage of 476 acre feet. Because of record drought conditions, my city is already tapping into its water allotment. Our local water managers have become concerned enough that the Huron City Council recently passed a resolution restricting water use on residential and industrial properties. Our community truly understands the value of water and the Council is confident the city's residents will conserve all the water they can, but will it be enough?

Today, I'm calling on you, the members of Congress gathered here today, to provide us a solution to the manmade drought that is crippling my community. If the drought is not dealt with quickly and appropriately and actions are not taken to better balance the needs of my community, and communities like it, with the needs of Delta fish, the inaction will truly threaten my community's existence. I fear continued drought and water diversions will make our agricultural community a thing of the past – our residents will be without jobs and incomes and our city will suffer the consequences. In short, our economy will collapse.

Solving the water crisis is so urgent to my city that when I told my friends and neighbors I was coming here today to testify many in my community wanted to share their stories as well. They wanted to tell you, their elected representatives in Congress, how the water crisis is impacting them. Today I have brought with me letters from many of my neighbors who wanted to have their voices heard. I hope you will take these letters with you, listen to their stories too, and use the knowledge they share to inform your decision making in Washington.

For many, the unemployment in the town of Huron may be forgotten once we leave here today, but it shouldn't be. For my community water is about jobs and the opportunity to thrive. But, what about you and your communities? To that I say, "what about your dinner table?" Congress must act soon to provide drought relief. Remember, it is communities like Huron, California that FEED THE WORLD!