



County of Fresno

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
SUPERVISOR PHIL LARSON – DISTRICT ONE

TESTIMONY
OF
SUPERVISOR JOHN P. (PHIL) LARSON
BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER
REGARDING
“IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE WESTSIDE REGIONAL DRAINAGE PLAN
AS A WAY TO IMPROVE
SAN JOAQUIN WATER QUALITY”

July 28, 2005.

Chairman Radanovich and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you this afternoon on the important issue of Westside drainage.

First, as a member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors, I am here as a representative of the largest agriculture producing county in the United States. With agricultural production of \$4.7 billion in 2004, agriculture was, and continues to be, the major industry in Fresno County. Every dollar received by Fresno County agriculture producers results in the economic extension benefit of three and one-half dollars to the total economy of the County.

Second as the elected representative of District 1, I am here representing the 180,000 residents of western Fresno County, an area encompassing 600,000 acres that produces grapes, cotton, tomatoes, almonds, oranges, and peaches for U.S. and world consumption. It is also an area that, under some drainage plans, may lose as much as 200,000 productive acres of farmland.

And, third, but certainly not last, I am here representing the farmers throughout the San Joaquin Valley who depend upon water to feed America. My family has farmed in the valley since 1934 producing grapes for raisins and wine. Prior to entering public service, I spent 38 years working with farmers throughout western Fresno County and Kings County as a crop consultant and pest control advisor, so I am familiar with the needs and concerns of area farmers.

Thus, I am not here as an expert on drainage plans, or the water quality in the San Joaquin River, but as someone with knowledge of the impact these plans may have, not only on my constituents and neighbors, but also on future U.S. agriculture production.

Westside Regional Drainage Plan

Since passage of the San Luis Act in 1960, Executive Branch Agencies, the Federal Court, the U.S. Congress, the State of California and local water districts have been working on drainage issues for the Central Valley. As a firsthand witness to the years of wrangling on this issue, my hope is that the Federal government will live up to its commitment to provide the drainage needed to sustain agricultural production and protect essential cropland from damage caused by lack of drainage.

Also, my hope is that technology and new agricultural practices can mitigate anticipated negative environmental impacts along the route and at the terminus of a drainage system. Not being an engineer or scientist, I cannot readily point to successful treatment systems that will remove the naturally occurring selenium and other harmful elements from the water drained from the Westside. However, in the more than forty years since drainage was promised to the Westside, American ingenuity has propelled us into the communications age, all but eliminated several diseases, mapped the human genome, and taken us into outer space. It seems to me that we should be encouraging

that ingenuity to resolve water treatment issues, so that we can keep as much cropland in production as possible while maintaining the quality of our water.

I do not claim to be an expert on the specifics of the various draft plans – my fellow witnesses will speak to the details of the Westside Regional Drainage Plan and the Bureau of Reclamation’s San Luis Drainage Feature Evaluation Draft Environmental Impact Statement. On a personal note, I would like to publicly acknowledge the recent efforts of the folks at the San Luis Unit, along with those at the Westlands Water District and others to accommodate the concerns of parties up and down the State while resolving the drainage issue.

Economic Impact

My primary concern is the economic impact of “retiring” or taking out of production up to 200,000 acres of useable cropland. It is estimated that for every 80 acres of land taken out of production one full time job will be lost. Retirement of land on the Westside would cause increased unemployment in an area of the County that already has some of the highest unemployment rates in the country. It also would impose an increased burden on the County’s Human Services system at a time when budget constraints threaten the level of existing services.

In addition, tens of thousands of seasonal jobs could be at risk. For example, 25,000 acres of lettuce in western Fresno County are hand harvested by seasonal workers during two six-week periods each year. These lands are in the Westlands Water District and could be retired under some plans. The loss of this seasonal work would have a detrimental economic impact on both the workers and the communities where they live.

One such community is Mendota that is in the center of the proposed retired lands. This small town with a population of 8,000 is home to many seasonal workers and currently is struggling with an annual unemployment rate that has been as high as 40% and was listed as 32% in the 2000 census. Retirement of useable acreage will further reduce the available jobs for the residents of the Cantaloupe Center of the World, 42% of whom now live below the poverty level.

There will be other consequences of land retirement. In 2002, when the County responded to the Westlands Water District’s “Analysis of Proposed Land Retirement,” our Agriculture Commissioner expressed concern that the greater the intermixing of production ground and retired land, the harder it would be for the remaining farms to deal with weed pests, insect pests, diseases and endangered species. Some of the busiest times for pest abatement services are in drought years when the land is idle. Thus, substantially increasing idle or retired land could also increase the need for expensive pest control.

Currently, one in three jobs in Fresno County is from agriculture, and one in ten jobs in the State of California. Agriculture production in Fresno County creates jobs up and down the State. The cotton and other products from the Westside are shipped through the San Francisco Bay and other products are shipped from the Port of Los

Angeles. As we decrease our agriculture production, I believe we will impact not only the farmers and residents of the Westside but local economies throughout the State.

As a farmer and a representative of farm communities, I am very concerned about the future of agriculture. For me, the Westside drainage issue has national implications because I am concerned that if we continue to reduce agriculture production throughout the country, we will cease to be self-sufficient in food production. Granted, retiring 200,000 acres in the western San Joaquin Valley may not make the country less self-sufficient, but if we do not address the underlying issues of maintaining both arable land and water quality there may come a day when we will be reliant on others for our food supply.

Personal Observations

Before closing, I would like to relate the direct results of the unresolved drainage issue on the Westside. One friend, who had grown cotton, tomatoes, and grain for years in Western Fresno County was forced to give up his 1800 acre farm due to lack of water drainage. Using the 80 acres equals one job formula, that equates to a loss of 22 jobs in Fresno County and, I believe, others throughout the State. Another friend was forced to retire 1500 acres of land. Granted not all of this was prime agricultural land, but he grew cotton, grain, sugar beets and seed alfalfa and dry farmed certain less productive acres. Now the land is unused and a potential breeding ground for insects and pests.

There has been another impact from such land retirements. Small businesses that supply farmers, like the truck and machine parts store in the community of Tranquility, are being forced to close because of the drop off in business as the land is taken out of production. I could relate similar land retirement stories to you about friends and neighbors in Coalinga, Huron, Firebaugh, San Joaquin and Riverdale even before the bulk of the acreage proposed in the drainage plans has been retired. To figure the worst case, I suppose we could just multiply these stories by 200,000 to get a picture of the Westside by 2010.

In closing, I would like to thank you for the honor of appearing before you on this important issue. Again, my hope is that we can find a good combination of best practices and technology to alleviate drainage problems so we can protect the San Joaquin River and save the land for agricultural production.