

Why Land Retirement Makes Sense for Westlands Water District

Westlands Water District and the Department of the Interior have entered into discussions concerning the permanent removal of up to 200,000 acres of farmland from irrigated agriculture. All of the land that would be eligible for retirement remains productive but is impacted by drainage problems. Land retirement in Westlands allows the state and federal governments, water users and environmentalists to enter a new era of enlightened water policy and regional problem solving.

This proposal, the largest land retirement program in the nation's history, helps to address California's water supply crisis and issues of water quality and drainage that historically have defied solution. It is a reasonable alternative to endless controversies that produce fractious debate and little resolution.

Potential Statewide Benefits

Fairness for California's Farmers

For farmers, the decision to permanently retire their land and abandon a way of life is wrenching. An essential part of the land retirement program calls for paying willing sellers a fair market price for their land. A fair land retirement program provides a model

The real solution to Westlands' problems is not more water but for the federal government to buy out the owners of about 200,000 acres of farmland and retire it from production.

Los Angeles Times editorial,
October 16, 2001

by which other resource allocation issues can be effectively addressed in California.

Stable Water Supplies

Under the land retirement proposal, Westlands would receive less water than it is now entitled to receive under its contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. At the same time, the District would enter into a new contract that would guarantee its farmers a more dependable supply of water. Currently, Westlands' has a contract for 1.15 million-acre feet of water per

year. Under this plan, Westlands would receive no more than 805,000 acre-feet of water in any year.

Environmental Restoration

Most of the 200,000 acres of drainage-impacted lands in Westlands could be converted to wildlife habitat or preserved for other beneficial uses. Species such as the endangered kangaroo rat and the San Joaquin kit fox would benefit from such a large conservation easement.

Significant Cost Savings

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is required by statute and is currently under court order to provide drainage and, if necessary, treatment facilities for Westlands. The San Luis Drain currently in place was closed and never reopened due to wildlife impacts at Kesterson Reservoir and concerns about similar impacts in the Delta. The land retirement proposal is the most cost-effective alternative to relieve the Bureau of this costly and difficult-to-achieve drainage obligation.

Water Quality Improvement

By taking drainage-impacted lands out of production, potential water quality impacts will be avoided. The potential benefits to other, nearby drainage-impacted lands are being assessed.



Westlands Water District

Area where groundwater is within 5 feet of surface

Economic Stability for Local Communities

Communities on the Westside of the San Joaquin Valley, such as Firebaugh and Mendota, have some of the highest unemployment rates in California. These agriculture-dependent communities are struggling to cope with the region's chronic water shortages and water supply uncertainties. The land retirement proposal will result in a more stable, long-term water supply for the region. It is anticipated that it also will result in improved employment and economic development.

Community Impacts

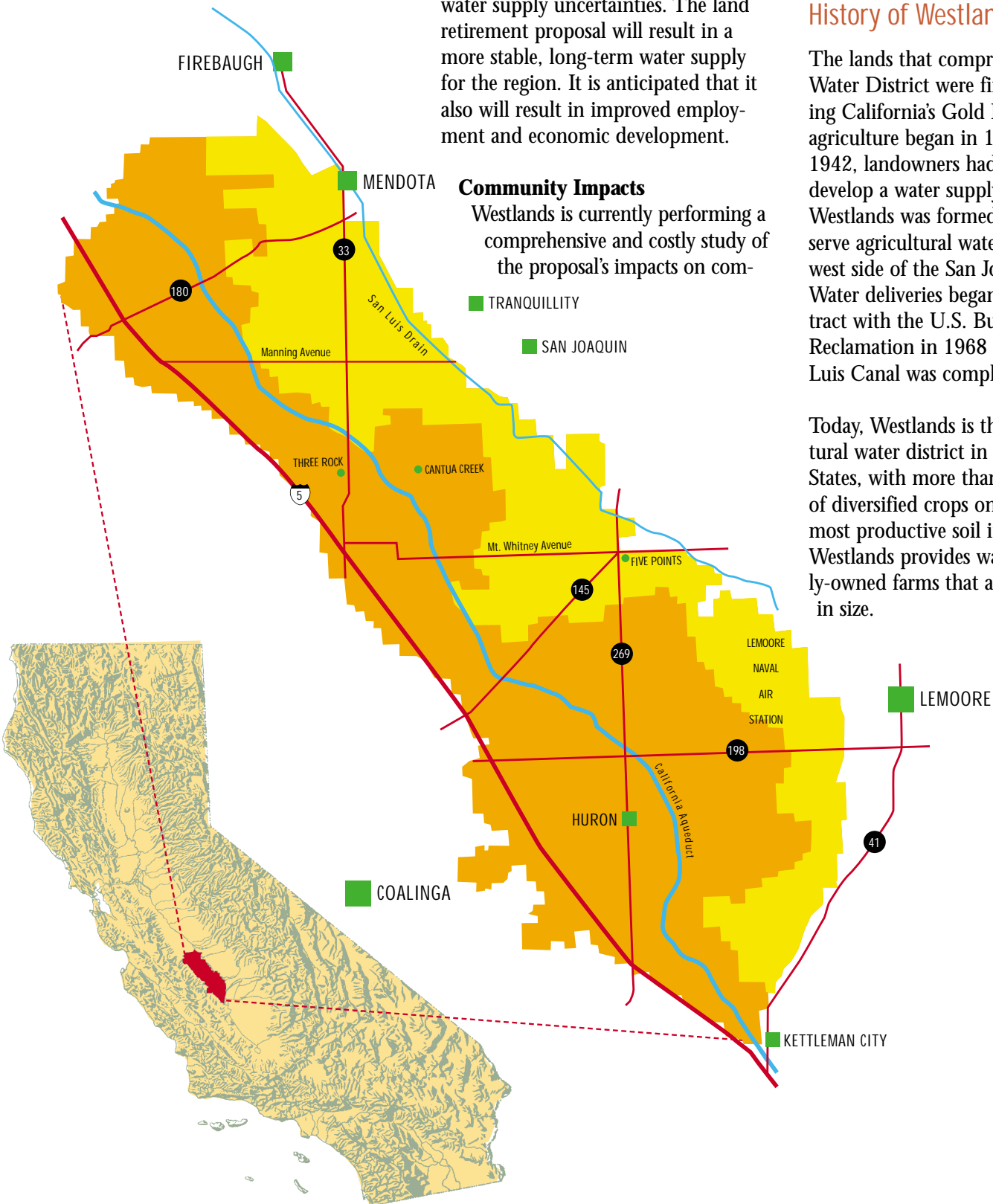
Westlands is currently performing a comprehensive and costly study of the proposal's impacts on com-

munities and other third parties. The study was designed in a manner that has been open and involved a wide range of regional interests, including local elected officials, farm workers, schools and businesses. This experience offers a model for regional collaboration and problem solving.

History of Westlands

The lands that comprise the Westlands Water District were first farmed during California's Gold Rush. Irrigated agriculture began in 1915 and by 1942, landowners had organized to develop a water supply system. Westlands was formed in 1952 to serve agricultural water users on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. Water deliveries began under a contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1968 when the San Luis Canal was completed.

Today, Westlands is the largest agricultural water district in the United States, with more than 600,000 acres of diversified crops on some of the most productive soil in the world. Westlands provides water to 600 family-owned farms that average 850 acres in size.



Farms within Westlands last year produced \$1 billion worth of food and fiber. This translates into \$3.5 billion in farm-related economic activity – nearly one-third of the \$12.5 billion generated by the agriculture-based economy of Fresno County.

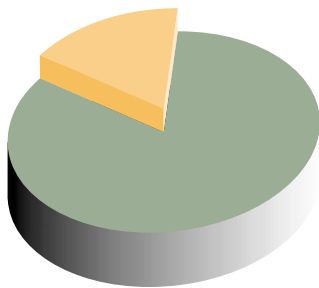
In addition to the farms within Westlands, several communities depend on the District's agricultural economy, including San Joaquin, Tranquillity, Huron, Firebaugh, Mendota, and Coalinga.

Irrigation and Drainage

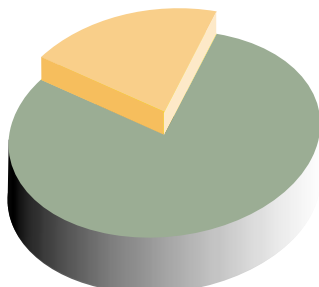
Drainage problems within Westlands are not unique. Wherever irrigation water is applied to fields, salts tend to build up in soils and groundwater. When the fields do not drain well, the salinity can build up to levels that are toxic to plants. This problem impacts irrigated farmlands worldwide.

Around the world, 71 million acres of the 373 million acres of irrigated lands

Irrigated Land
Affected by Salinity



Worldwide: 373 million acres
Affected Land: 71 million acres



U.S.: 44 million acres
Affected Land: 11 million acres

are impacted by salinity. In the United States, nearly one-fourth of the 44 million acres of irrigated lands are plagued with salinity problems.

The west side of California's Central Valley is severely affected by this problem. The irrigation water imported into the region from Northern California contains high levels of salts. A shallow layer of Corcoran Clay under some parts of the Valley prevents water from filtering deep into the ground. With no place to drain, the salty water builds up – or “perches” – above these impermeable clay layers. As the salty water rises to the surface it impacts the roots of crops, reducing yields and eventually making the land unproductive.

Drainage in Westlands

The federal government knew about drainage problems in the Westlands Water District before the District was formed. Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to provide drainage service to the farmers on the Valley's west side when it passed the legislation that created the San Luis Unit of the Central Valley Project in 1960. When the Westlands Water District entered into a water supply agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the promise to provide drainage service was expressly included as a contract term. However, delivering on that promise has been difficult.

Initial plans called for the collection and transport of drainage water from the Central Valley to the Bay-Delta. Construction on a massive drainage system began in 1968 but was halted in 1975. As a result, drainage water was placed into Kesterson Reservoir near Los Banos.

In 1983, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recorded numerous incidences of mortality and deformities among waterfowl in Kesterson believed to be the effects of toxic concentrations of

Land Retirement Proposal

- The U.S. government would purchase up to 200,000 acres of drainage-impacted lands, permanently removing them from irrigated agricultural production.
- The lands would be owned by Westlands and managed as wildlife habitat or other beneficial uses.
- Westlands would receive a new, more reliable water-supply contract for 805,000 acre feet of water per year instead of its current contract for 1.15 million acre feet of water per year.
- The United States would be relieved of its obligation to provide drainage services to Westlands.
- Westlands would dismiss an application to appropriate and use water from the San Joaquin River.

selenium in the water. Kesterson was closed to agricultural drainage water in 1986 and Westlands has been without drainage service since that time.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government remains obligated by law to provide drainage services to the Westlands Water District. As recently as February 2001, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed that, “The Department of the Interior must act to provide drainage service. The Bureau of Reclamation has studied the problem for over two decades. In the interim, lands within Westlands are subject to irreparable injury caused by agency action unlawfully withheld. Now the time has come for the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation to bring the past two decades of studies, and the 50 million

Westlands' Guiding Principles for Land Retirement

- The plan must provide balanced benefits for all affected parties.
- The plan must provide farmers a fair and reasonable price for their land, with values determined as if those lands had drainage services provided.
- The program should be voluntary, involving only willing sellers.
- No harm or loss of water should occur to any other Central Valley Project water user.
- Third-party impacts must be identified and addressed in an open and public process.
- Westside communities and farmers must have a more stable water supply.

dollars expended pursuing an 'in valley' drainage solution, to bear in meeting its duty to provide drainage under the San Luis Act."

Drainage concerns

Due to environmental constraints, providing drainage has become significantly more challenging and costly, making the original drainage disposal strategies difficult. Researchers have identified several potential drainage service strategies including treatment of agricultural drainage water, deep-well injection and use of evaporation ponds; however, all are costly and their long-term effectiveness and impacts to the environment are unknown.

Water supply concerns

Westlands Water District has experienced a dramatic reduction in the amount of water it receives from the Central Valley Project. Since 1991, the Bureau of Reclamation has reduced water deliveries to Westlands to the point where today, the District can expect to receive less than 50 percent of the water its government contract promises in a normal water year.

Through technological innovations, the 600 farms within the Westlands Water District are among the most water-efficient farms in the world. Still, they cannot survive if they continue to receive only half of the water they need. When farms fail, the communities dependent on those farms face significant economic and social disruptions.

Retirement plan proposal

Following the February 2001 9th Circuit Court of Appeals decision affirming the government's obligation to provide drainage, former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt approached Westlands with a land retirement proposal. While Westlands remains committed to ensuring landowners in the District receive the services they are entitled to receive, the District is aware that existing constraints make providing these services difficult. As such, the District has entered into negotiations with the Department of the Interior and others concerning land retirement.

Questions about the land retirement proposal and the economic analysis of community impacts may be directed to Dave Ciapponi at Westlands Water District at dciapponi@westlandswater.org or 559-241-6233.



Contract Water Supply

