

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS MUST BE CONSIDERED IN WESTLANDS' LAND RETIREMENT DISCUSSIONS

Editors: The following is an opinion piece authored by Dr. Frank Gornick, Chancellor of the West Hills Community College District, which serves the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. The district boundaries for West Hills and the Westlands Water District are very similar.

While doing statistical analysis, researchers form a hypothetical question and then do testing to find whether their hypothesis was valid. Researchers may think they know what the outcome will be but frequently they're proven wrong. That's why they test the hypothesis.

At issue in the Westlands Water District land retirement program is a hypothesis that suggests that the economy on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley will remain stable. If the district is successful in moving available water from marginal land to more productive land, some models suggest that jobs and the \$1 billion in production on Westlands' farms will be preserved. Keep in mind that the availability of water has always been an issue in the Westlands District.

What if the hypothesis is proven wrong? What will become of the communities on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley? What will happen to Firebaugh, Mendota, Riverdale, Huron and San Joaquin? What will happen to schools like Westside Elementary? What will happen to the farm workers who populate those communities and whose children attend those schools?

Even if the models are right, the economists acknowledge that there will be short-term impacts for workers, businesses and local governments. Schools will feel those impacts more than most.

Already struggling with financial woes brought on by the state budget, the school districts around and near Westlands are feeling a double hit.

Much has been said in the news of the problems of farmers in Westlands. Much more needs to be said about the problems of the farm workers and their communities and schools.

If, as is being proposed, as much as one-third of the 600,000 acre district is retired from agricultural production, many jobs may be lost. While the model suggests that those jobs may be recovered, we need to address the short-term (and possibly long-term) impacts that individuals, schools and communities may suffer.

Many people may be forced from their homes. Communities and the tax base – on which schools in part depend for funding – will be reduced. Those remaining in the communities will suffer the consequences.

What are those consequences? School districts and cities throughout the region have passed bonds. The value of those bonds is tied directly to the value of the land. If the land is removed from production – in fact purchased by the government or some arm of it (including Westlands Water District, which pays no taxes) – the repayment obligation on those bonds is in jeopardy. Those remaining may have their taxes increase.

Mendota and Firebaugh have beautiful new high schools that were built with bond funds. Riverdale has a newly remodeled facility and Huron has a new middle school built with bond funds.

Public school officials in the area have been meeting to discuss the potential problems they face as farmland is retired in Westlands. They have agreed that farmers in the area are entitled to compensation based on the failed promises of the federal government. They have also agreed that the government must not only look at the needs of the farmers, but also the needs of the workers, the communities in which they live and the schools that educate their children.

As part of the discussion of land retirement in Westlands, there must be consideration of how to fulfill the bond indebtedness, how to support school districts as they transition through periods of declining enrollment, and how to supply training for displaced farm workers. Whether long or short-term, these are issues that must be mitigated with the financial resources of the federal government.

Too many communities and families' lives are at stake on the west side to allow this social experiment to go forward without an economic safety net for the schools and municipalities affected by this land retirement.