

# CALIFORNIA'S DETROIT

Like Atrios, I view this partly with the awe of watching a massive slow-moving trainwreck.

About a year and a half ago, well before Mendota started making headlines, things had gotten bad enough that Riofrio stopped selling fresh milk at his store. Too few could afford it anymore. In the last few months, the downward spiral has greatly accelerated. Farmers in Westlands, who've yanked about 100,000 acres out of production since 2000, say they may now be forced to idle as many as 150,000 more for lack of water.

The issues at play are complicated. They're also fraught with bad blood. Farmers are set to receive only 3.7 million acre-feet of water this year from federal and state plumbing systems—about 2 million acre-feet less than in a normal year. Some environmentalists, however, have been quick to accuse the growers of overstating the problem. They say farmers have extra water stored both above and below ground and have gotten supplies transferred from other locations.

[snip]

What's critical for policymakers to keep in mind is that, in the end, none of this squabbling matters. It's simply a distraction from the one thing they should be focused on: The people of Mendota are suffering terribly – and steps need to be taken right away to bring them relief.

First, U.S. officials have to resist pressure from environmental groups and others and allow, at least temporarily, for the partial lifting of the fish protections. It won't completely solve

things, but it will help. It will also send a crucial signal of support to Riofrio and his customers, who are fast becoming a more endangered species than Chinook salmon or delta smelt.

Second, and most important, federal, state and local officials need to coordinate on a long-term economic development strategy – and put some serious dollars behind it. This must go way beyond the \$260 million in federal stimulus money that’s been promised by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to patch up ailing irrigation infrastructure across the state.

The real question is what emerges after the almonds, tomatoes and cantaloupes disappear. What happens as ever more Central Valley farmland is retired, as is inevitable? What does the future look like for the northwest corner of Fresno County? Will the usual solution – building a new prison – be all that’s conceived? Or can the sun-baked San Joaquin Valley become a hub of solar power and alternative energy, as some have suggested? If so, who will prepare workers for this new field? [my emphasis]

But I also view it with the irony of someone who spent months hearing about how stupid my state was, and then, more recently, hearing the very same people talk about how, three years into a drought, maybe they’ll be allowed to use rain barrels to collect water for landscaping needs in the near future and won’t that be all progressive.

Our town (admittedly a hippie outpost) instituted discounts for water customers who had rain barrels last year. But I need to water so infrequently—every time I plant something and maybe 4 other times over the summer—that I haven’t gotten around to getting a rain barrel

yet. It probably helps, of course, that I put in native species about 6 years ago, so I would only ever need the water for my food garden. My friends in CA are talking prospectively about losing their lawn, too, though they're not ready to do that yet, either.

And sometimes when I get really cranky of the lectures, I note that MI is likely to pick up the Ag that CA loses—we already have the second most diverse Ag after CA—as it becomes more and more unsustainable to grow food where water is limited. Meanwhile, as CA experiences the kind of budget crisis we've been having for years, it's looking like we'll be housing some of CA's prisoners—so much for the hope of a new prison in San Joaquin Valley.

The thing is, as stupid as MI has been and as stupid as CA has been, they are inextricably linked. You can't make the desert feed the country without a trucking network that follows the combustion engine culture. We've got to stop the approach that pits states against each other for funds and—just as importantly—industries and use the twin ostrich-sized canaries of MI and CA as a wakeup call to start making our entire lifestyle more sustainable.