

RURAL CALIFORNIA: THE CURRENT REALITY

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The information in this post is from [Rural Migration News](#), a publication on rural issues at University of California, Davis. Rural Migration News summarizes and analyzes the most important migration-related issues affecting immigrant farm workers in California and the United States during the preceding quarter. This post focuses on poverty, water, labor shortages, health and current state laws.

Poverty

Fresno County had the state's highest farm sales and the state's highest poverty rate in 2010. Fresno County had farm sales of \$5.9 billion, and almost 27 percent of Fresno County's 935,000 residents had incomes below the poverty line. Over 36 percent of Fresno County's school-aged children were poor, also the highest rate in the state.



Neighboring Tulare County had the second-highest farm sales, \$4.9 billion, and the second-highest poverty rate, 25 percent.

About 16 percent of California residents had incomes below the poverty line, which was \$22,113 for a family of four in 2010, and 21 percent of California's school-aged children were poor.

High farm sales and high poverty rates often go together. Agriculture offers many seasonal jobs, so that even if farm workers earn more than the state's minimum wage of \$8 an hour, many do not have sufficient earnings to lift their families above the poverty line. Economic development efforts aim to preserve the San Joaquin Valley's economic engine, agriculture, while diversifying the economy to create more high-paying year-round jobs.

The Congressional Research Service in 2005 found per capita income in the eight-county San Joaquin Valley was lower than in the 68-county Central Appalachia region. Both regions are anchored by one natural-resource based industry, agriculture and mining.

The San Joaquin Valley continues to attract migrants from Mexico despite double-digit unemployment rates. With conditions even worse in rural Mexico, many rural Mexicans are drawn to the San Joaquin Valley for opportunity for themselves and their children. Some observers fear that the central San Joaquin Valley will eventually resemble Appalachia, with young people leaving for education and not returning. Residents who remain may not be attractive to job-creating investors because they lack education or are retired.

Children of farm workers who do not move away for education or to join the military sometimes bolster the ranks of gangs. The state mounted an 18-month operation, Operation Garlic Press, that resulted in over 100 arrests in October 2011 of suspected Nuestra Familia gang affiliates in farming towns such as Dos Palos and Los Banos. Napa grape growers who do not provide housing for their workers pay a \$10 per acre fee to support affordable housing for their farm workers; growers must re-approve the levy in June 2012. The county is conducting a \$110,000 study of farm worker housing needs to be conducted by Bay Area Economics and California Human Development Corporation. (See the earlier [assessment](#) completed by CIRS.)

California attracts people from other countries, but fewer from other states. In 1950, over 53 percent of California's almost 11 million residents were born somewhere else in the US and moved to California; in 2010, less than 20 percent of over 37 million California residents moved to California from other states. In 2010, almost 55 percent of California residents were born in California (another 28 percent are immigrants). With fewer educated newcomers moving from other states, educating the children born in California becomes more important for economic success.

Water

In 2003, San Diego County signed a 75-year agreement to buy Colorado River water from the Imperial Irrigation District. The IID water is transferred to San Diego via the Colorado Aqueduct owned by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

The IID-San Diego water transfer agreement has come under pressure because of declining run off from Imperial Valley farms into the Salton Sea, the 360-square mile lake created in 1905 by flooding and levee breaks that has been sustained by run off from Imperial Valley farms. The Salton Sea has 50,000 parts of salt per million parts of water, more salt than the Pacific Ocean, which has 35,000 ppm.

There are 480,000 acres of farm land in the Imperial Valley, and about 5,800 have been fallowed to make water available to San Diego. The amount of fallowed farm land is projected to rise to 30,000 acres as water transfers increase, which could decrease run off and increase salinity in the Salton Sea.

Imperial Valley farmers get about 20 percent of the Colorado River's water under the "first in time, first in right" principle of water use.

California in 2003 offered to help fund restoration of the Salton Sea to finalize the 2003 IID-San Diego agreement, but budget deficits mean the state has not provided restoration funds. Some farmers, who fear that they will eventually have to fallow more land or make payments to maintain the Salton Sea, sued to end the IID-San Diego agreement. However, the California's 3rd Appellate District Court upheld the agreement in December 2011.

Labor Shortages

Some California farmers complained of labor shortages in fall 2011. Dan Fiorio said he found it hard to find reliable workers to harvest bell peppers paying \$8.50 an hour; California's minimum wage is \$8.

Fiorio said that the total cost of picking a bucket of banana peppers rose from \$1.25 in 2010 to \$1.75 in 2011 because he had to use more expensive labor contractors to provide picking crews.

Grower Joe Aiello of Uesugi Farms said: "We can't get American people to do these jobs. They won't do it. They can stay home and draw unemployment, and they're just not gonna do this type of work."



Photo by Walter Armbruster

Health

Cal/OSHA announced several fines for violating heat-safety regulations in January 2012. Labor contractor C. Clunn Consulting of Holtville was fined \$74,125 because a 47-year old farm worker died of heat-related illness July 7, 2011, and C. Clunn did not provide training on how to recognize and deal with heat-related illness. Cal/OSHA fined AgPrime Corporation of Los Banos \$61,425 for not treating a 16-year old picking bell peppers for heat-related stress on July 6, 2011. Methyl iodide, a fumigant used to sterilize soil before planting strawberries and other crops, was approved for use in California after methyl bromide was banned for destroying the protective ozone layer around the earth. In January 2012, a suit filed by farm worker advocates against the state is scheduled to go to trial. The plaintiffs argue that the state did not adequately consider the dangers of methyl iodide to farm workers. Western Growers Assurance Trust opened the Cedars Health and Wellness Center in August 2010 to serve workers insured by its employer-members in the Salinas area. About 1,800 of the 3,000 grower members of the Western Growers Association provide health insurance for some or all of their employees. Driscoll's Berry in 2009 opened three low-cost clinics that serve 18,000 seasonal farm workers and their family members in Watsonville, Santa Maria and Oxnard. Healthstat provides care in these facilities at the subsidized rate of \$6 a week per family.

Laws

AB 243, signed into law in October 2011, requires farm labor contractors to disclose on employee pay statements the name and address of all farm employers where the worker was employed during the payroll period. AB 469 requires employers, at the time of hire, to provide a notice with employer contact details, the rate of pay and the regular payday.

AB 1236 is a new law that prohibits California and its cities and counties from requiring employers to participate in E-Verify unless they are required to participate by federal law. Federal contractors, for example, are required to participate in E-Verify.

SB 459 is a new law that increases penalties on employers who willfully misclassify employees as independent contractors from \$15,000 to \$25,000 per violation effective January 1, 2012. According to supporters, employers avoid payroll tax, health care benefits, and other compensation and benefits when they hire workers as contractors, saving at least 30 percent on labor costs.

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