



SIERRA CLUB

TEHIPITE CHAPTER

More Water Will Not Bring San Joaquin Valley Salt-Impaired Farmland Back into Production

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<https://cah2oresearch.com/2020/02/17/more-water-will-not-bring-salt-impaired-land-in-the-san-joaquin-valley-back-into-production/>

Last month, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, bending to San Joaquin Valley agribusiness interests, issued an emergency drought declaration in the midst of record January storms. Why? To bring more water to San Joaquin Valley farms. This announcement set aside environmental regulations designed to protect water quality and endangered salmon from extinction. See Feb. 17, 2023 LA Times editorial, "Newsom's drought order amid wet winter threatens iconic California species." <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-02-17/editorial-newsoms-drought-order-amid-wet-winter-threatens-iconic-california-species>.

The Bay Delta's habitat has already been altered by salinity; seawater pushes inland when rivers are diverted to farms. When the Trump administration approved a sharp increase in federal water exports from the Delta to Valley farms in 2020, experts correctly predicted catastrophic impacts for migrating salmon. Increased Delta pumping to satisfy an unlimited thirst by

industrial growers for almonds and other water-intensive crops has brought profits to San Joaquin Valley west side growers. But impoverished local communities such as Huron and Mendota have not benefited.

Soil salinity on the Valley's west side occurs due to the peculiar character of the landscape. First, an impermeable clay layer lies below the surface. Second, roughly one-third of the Valley's irrigated land has naturally-occurring salts, including selenium, which can be deadly to fish and wildlife. A temporary solution is to flush the soil with irrigation water. But unless the soil is drained, groundwater trapped above the clay layer eventually rises into the root zone and kills crops. Salt can even appear on the soil as a white crust.

In 2002, the Westlands Water District received federal payments to retire 37,100 acres of farmland (58 square miles) containing high concentrations of selenium. But this was only the start; the Valley still has over 1,000 square miles of marginal farmland likely to become unprofitable due to salt impairment. Satellite data reveals 811 sq. mi. of land on the Valley's west side and in the Tulare Lake region of Kings County strongly or extremely impaired by salinity. Another 681 square miles is moderately impaired and could go out of production by 2040.

Growers have been following salt-impaired lands and reallocating surface water supplies to grow permanent crops on better land. Westlands' 2017 Water Management Plan Update shows a loss

of 418 sq. mi. from irrigated production since 1985; an additional 379 sq. mi. of agricultural land has been converted to non-irrigated uses, including dry farming, grazing, and solar power.

Meanwhile, local communities have been left to deal with blowing dust and the loss of local jobs. An example is the City of Huron, where 2 out of 5 residents live in poverty. The simple fact is, there is currently no financially viable way to bring the salt-impaired lands back into production.

Huron's Mayor, Rey León, sees the future of Huron in Westlands' planned 20,000-acre solar farm and the Valley's growing renewable energy industry. Renewable energy project construction and energy-efficiency projects created 105,400 jobs in the San Joaquin Valley 2002-2015 (UC Berkeley Labor Center). A 2017 study found that, of 1,862 entry-level solar jobs in Kern County, 43% were filled by workers from disadvantaged communities. In a February 14, 2020 Fresno Bee opinion piece. León stated:

We can save our Valley communities and create a better world for future generations [with] more rooftop solar and battery storage at our homes . . . solar and wind farms combined with large-scale energy storage . . . paired with . . . student scholarships, skills upgrading and employment. This approach will allow us to transition away from polluting fossil fuels once and for all while we uplift our community and quality of life.

Our Sierra Club members agree, and recognize that the future of Huron and other west side San Joaquin Valley

communities lies in a transition to a sustainable economy with good jobs— not in dead-end industrial agriculture, with its toxic legacy of salt-impaired farmland.



Tehipite Chapter Sierra Club
Zambia Safari Adventure
Thursday, March 16 at 7 PM. Note: This will be on a THURSDAY.
In-person meeting: Woodward Park Library community room, 944 Perrin Ave, Fresno.

Traveler, photographer, and outdoor enthusiast, Robert Groos will focus his lens on his recent adventure in Zambia. In a series of action-oriented photos and close-up videography, you will witness wild animals in their native habitat undisturbed by the hordes of tourists that flock other safari destinations: lions, leopards, giraffe, zebra, elephants, hippos, buffalo, and birds. Learn about the ecosystem in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park.

Free and open to the general public. More information available at sierraclub.org/tehipite. Register there at the chapter web page if you'd like to receive an email reminder about the event.