

West side farming making a comeback

Robert Rodriguez and John Holland, McClatchy Newspapers, 5-30-11

As newly planted crops begin to emerge from the soil, a sense of renewed optimism is spreading across the San Joaquin Valley's west side.

After several dry and sluggish years, farmers are planting more acres, investing in equipment and rehiring idled workers.

Fueling the comeback are more irrigation water for growers and rising prices for major crops, including cotton, wheat and nuts.

"Things are much better than they have been in a while," said farmer Dan Errotebere, who plans to farm more acres of cotton and almonds in Fresno County. He anticipates his labor needs will rise by about 10 percent.

Fresno County farm jobs rose to 43,800 last month, up 1,000 over April 2010, according to the California Employment Development Department.

It does not break out how much of the gain happened on the west side, but it's likely that jobs were created on farms that had lost water because of drought and rules aimed at protecting fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Stanislaus County had 12,300 people working in agriculture last month, up from 10,600 a year earlier. San Joaquin County stood at 12,500 last month, up 200.

Merced County bucked the trend, dropping from 9,200 to 8,600.

The irrigation cutbacks — down to as little as 10 percent of the contracted amount — hit hard at the parts of the west side that depend heavily on the federal Central Valley Project. The deliveries have bounced back to 80 percent thanks to two straight years of abundant rain and snow.

This is good news at least for the short term in the Del Puerto Water District, general manager Bill Harrison said. The Patterson-based agency supplies farmland straddling Interstate 5 from Vernalis to Santa Nella.

Trickle-down effect

Harrison said a long-term solution, including more reservoir capacity, is still needed to keep farming viable.

The eastern part of the valley got through the drought with mild to moderate cutbacks, thanks to strong water rights and adequate reservoirs. This area includes the Modesto, Turlock, Oakdale and South San Joaquin irrigation districts.

In the west side city of Firebaugh, City Manager Jose Antonio Ramirez says he can do something he hasn't done in a while: share good news.

The mayor recently presided over two ribbon-cutting ceremonies, one for a new auto-parts store and the other for a new playground for special-needs children.

Ramirez said a tomato-processing plant in Firebaugh also plans to increase its work force from 750 workers to 1,100.

"We lost a few businesses and this community was hurting," Ramirez said. "But when farming is healthy, it helps turn things around. And that's happening, slowly but surely."

A better farm economy also translates to more money for the city. Sales tax revenue for Firebaugh is projected to rise 5 percentage points this year.

At its worst, the city's sales-tax revenue nose-dived 23 percent in 2009. That was the last year of a three-year dry spell for farmers. Thousands of acres were fallowed within the Westlands Water District and hundreds of workers were laid off.

More water means more acres being farmed. Westlands officials estimate farmers will farm an additional 60,000 to 90,000 acres this year. The district is made up of 600,000 acres.

Among those planting more is John Harris, a longtime grower. His acreage will increase 30 percent from the previous year. Harris will farm 10,970 acres, with much of that growth coming from cotton, wheat and almonds.

He says his payroll will top \$12.9 million, a \$4 million increase from 2009.

Equipment investment

Harris also is funneling more money into equipment. He plans to spend a "few million dollars" on tractors, harvesters and other farm equipment.

"When farmers have money coming in, they spend it on equipment and labor," Harris said.

Errotebere's farm also is growing. This year, he will farm 2,000 acres of cotton, an increase of 500 acres from last year. He also plans to add 320 acres of almonds for a total of 1,000 acres.

"We are responding to market forces, and having the water supply has allowed us to do that," Errotebere said.

At Kingsburg Cultivators Inc., sales of the company's custom-made equipment have gone up by at least 5 percent this year. The company makes harvesting, cutting and tilling equipment for the nut and grape industry.

Clint Erling, one of the co-owners, said farmers are updating aging equipment or adding new pieces to make their farms more efficient.

"Things are good right now," Erling said. "Let's just hope it lasts a while."