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# Editorial: Westlands wins, but at what cost?

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Over the past year, the Westlands Water District and other irrigation districts in the San Joaquin Valley have engaged in a dangerous campaign of misinformation.

They brought in Fox News' Sean Hannity to spout his claim that farmers in California "are losing their land, their crops and their livelihood all because of a 2-inch fish."

They've portrayed the San Joaquin Valley as a "dust bowl." And they've tried to sell the public on the idea that a "man-made drought" is harming farmers, not the low precipitation of the last three years.

It makes for great propaganda, but lousy policy. Sen. Dianne Feinstein and various other politicians are falling over themselves to further divert water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to help corporate farm operations to the south. They are doing this even though there's scant evidence the valley's west side has been significantly harmed by federal efforts to protect the Delta's crashing stocks of salmon and smelt.

As the Los Angeles Times reported earlier this week, farm jobs in Fresno County actually rose last year. Statewide, the number of farm jobs fell less than half a percent from 2008 and 2009. Outside of health care providers, farm owners "are probably No. 2 in terms of dodging the worst impacts of the recession," said Jeffrey Michael, director of the Business Forecasting Center at the University of the Pacific in Stockton.

Feinstein could help provide clarity, yet sadly, she has only added to the murk. In an op-ed in The Bee last Saturday, she painted a picture of farmers hacking down almond orchards even as reservoirs were brimming with water. Really? Folsom Reservoir and Lake Oroville – two of the workhorses that provide the Delta with water – are at less than half their capacity. Orchards? The state has more acres of bearing almond trees than ever.

No doubt, some farmers on the valley's west side are being hurt by the drought and endangered species protections. Yet even this needs to be kept in perspective: Westlands and other nearby districts lack the water rights of more senior water users. Inevitably, they get cut back in lean times so senior users can get their water.

Given their status, you might think that west side farmers would be prudent and rely on field crops instead of orchards that are vulnerable to water cutbacks. Instead, they've done the opposite. From 1998 to 2008, almond acreage in Fresno County increased from 46,968 acres to 120,400 acres, much of it on the west side of the valley.

With much at risk and much to be gained by accessing extra government water, Westlands' leaders have put their energies into cultivating friends in Washington and Sacramento and punishing perceived enemies.

This month, the irrigation district pulled its membership from the Association of California Water Agencies. Why? All because ACWA Director Tim Quinn dared speak the truth: That the Delta Stewardship Council created by last year's water legislation should have been given "more authority to enforce its views."

By using these tactics of intimidation and misinformation, Westlands has been able to win small victories, such as extra water allocations the Obama administration announced Friday. Yet it does so at enormous cost to its reputation.

Westlands needs reliable water deliveries, and that can only occur if it works within the water community of California on long-term fixes. By bullying and burning bridges, Westlands risks becoming a pariah in the water world. Over the long run, that will only hurt the farmers of this district and the business and farmworkers who depend on it.

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