

# Crops threatened by irrigation cutoff

by Nick Benton

Is Donald Hodel, the new Secretary of the Interior, trying to outgun the Agricultural Department in the effort to destroy American farm production? Hodel in mid-March suddenly cut off irrigation water to 42,000 acres of prime farmland on the westside of California's Central Valley. \$45 million of U.S. agricultural crops are immediately threatened by the move.

A spokesman for the Westlands Water District in Fresno, Calif., told *EIR* that the March 15 ruling to cut off the water flowing through the California Water Project aqueduct system came as "a total shock and surprise," and comes within days of the scheduled first spring plantings of \$45 million worth of cotton, tomatoes, onions, and other vegetable crops.

She said that the unilateral decision appeared to come "from the top," namely Interior Secretary Donald Hodel, and that it was an entirely unexpected response to a long-term problem with waste-water drainage in the district. Unless the secretary alters his decision within a matter of days, she said, the farmers in the district will be forced to go to court to save the spring planting. Otherwise, the valves will be turned, shutting off the water, by mid-April, and the entire planting will be lost. A team of the district's farmers was in Washington to try to reverse the decision, and to offer short- and long-term remedies for the waste water problem.

However, given the history of "environmental" and related pretexts for attacking farming in this area, it may be that only a strong political fight can turn the situation around. Fresno County, the nation's single largest agricultural producing county in cash value terms (\$1.2 billion gross annually), and the Westlands Water District includes 42,000 irrigated acres in the western part of the county, in particular, have been the target of zero-growth obstructionist campaigns for years.

The area is one of the exemplary capital-intensive agricultural regions in the nation, involving the vast California aqueduct, and family farms of 5,000-10,000 acres and more, utilizing the most advanced fertilizers, pesticides, and mechanization to produce massive yields. All of this is on top of a flatland that was once a lake, and before that part of the Pacific Ocean, and was semiarid desert until the aqueduct was completed in 1960.

Once the aqueduct was built, the region's productivity came under attack from the Cesar Chavez "farmworker" cult in the 1960s, which broadened into a major attack on University of California research programs into mechanization technologies for agriculture, applied with great success to this region in particular. Then the "Land for the People" operation sought, with the help of the Carter administration in the late 1970s, to impose an antiquated 160-acre limitation law in the region, which would have forced the break-up of the most productive family farms. Then came the ban on use of pesticides, especially DDT, based on fraudulent data promoted by "environmentalists." Later followed the Jerry Brown-led movement to kill the proposed California Peripheral Canal project.

The specifics behind Hodel's decision involve the need for waste-water disposal facilities in the Westlands Water District. Because of the "lake basin" geological characteristics of the valley, its topsoil sits on an impermeable clay layer at 20 to 40 feet. Due to salinity factors in the water, irrigation requires use of sufficient volumes of water to leach the impurities out of the topsoil, especially out of the "root zones." This water gets trapped above the clay layer, and even rises to the surface in some areas, and so must be disposed of.

Disposal has been accomplished by installation of an underground drain that gathers and carries the waste water from the Westlands district's affected 42,000 acres to the Kesterson Reservoir 90 miles north of the district.

The original plan, devised in 1970, was to extend the drain all the way into the San Francisco Bay delta, where the water would flow into the ocean. However, environmentalist obstruction blocked that plan, so that the drain, already under construction, had to stop short, and deposit the water in the Kesterson Reservoir, instead.

But environmentalist pressure asserted itself again to place the Kesterson Reservoir under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife agency, as a habitat for fish, waterfowl and vegetation. Needless to say, this created the pretext for the current cutoff of water to the district altogether, by virtually insuring that the wildlife that was encouraged to gather at the Kesterson Reservoir would suffer from the impurities in the waste water that was being drained into the site!

The salinium, boron, chromium and other impurities in the 7,000 acre feet of waste water flowing annually into the reservoir became concentrated in the vegetation there, which in turn was being eaten by the birds using the area as nesting grounds, as well as other wildlife.

Confronted with the effects of this scenario, the farmers of the Westlands district were told by the California Water Resources Control Board that they had five months to come up with a plan to clean up or close down the Kesterson Reservoir, and that they had three years to implement and complete the plan. While efforts were underway to look at alternatives for dealing with the waste water, such as drilling deep-well depositories beneath the clay layer, Interior's sudden decision to deny all federal water to the area came down.