Projected Community Impacts from the Proposed Water Transfer:
The Coachella and Imperial Valleys

A Memorandum to the
Latino Legislative Caucus of the
California State Senate
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Executive Summary

Ethnographic field research conducted in the desert communities of Southern California has revealed a strong trend toward farm intensification. Agricultural corporations continue to supply national and international markets by heavily investing in the production of high-value specialty crops with Colorado River water. Farm intensification has created many new farm jobs, in a greater variety, and promoted the settlement of former international migrant farm workers in the state.

The settled population, many of whom have become or are in the process of becoming U.S. citizens, not only satisfies growing local labor demand, but also supplies workers for seasonal and harvest demands in other parts of California, particularly in the Central Valley, as well as the northwest states. The desert communities have in fact become important wintering and staging areas for California’s seasonal agribusiness (growers and commercial farmers) workforce. In addition, these communities provide supplemental service and domestic labor to the thriving hospitality and tourism industry; though anchored in agriculture, the workforce has multiple engagements with the local economy. New, primarily young immigrant families have moved into the area and are building coherent communities.

Proposed modifications in the water supply as a result of a water transfer to San Diego will not only affect farm and agricultural production but will endanger the supply of labor to other sectors within and outside of the region, and will potentially undermine the social and economic foundation of these new California communities. An examination of the effects of proposed water modifications would require addressing not only farmers and agribusiness, but also the thousands of families that have built new lives in the desert communities.
Introduction

We used the ethnographic method to conduct our research. This long-term, *in situ* practice studies specific peoples and communities, giving researchers an in-depth understanding that only comes from working closely with subjects over a substantial period of time. Since 1995, we have concentrated our efforts in the desert region that includes the Coachella and Imperial Valleys (Figure 1). Based on our understanding of rural California, we applied our knowledge and experience to the specific study of the Coachella Valley towns of Coachella, Thermal, Oasis, and North Shore, with a particular emphasis on Mecca. We are thus able to make informed predictions about how water policy changes will affect agricultural activity and farm employment, and how this will probably affect these communities and others like them.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1**
**Latino Communities in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys, California**

Water Dynamics in Coachella Valley and Imperial Valley

The acquisition of sustained water sources was crucial to the economic and social development of the interior desert regions of Southern California, and the main source has been the Colorado
River. Since the beginning of the 20th century, even before Colorado River water was available, settlers of the Coachella and Imperial Valleys have directed their attention to building water infrastructures that would provide irrigation to their crops. With secure water, growers employ two strategies for year-round production. The warm temperatures and the low risk of frost during the winter months allow for off-season production. Moreover, growers engage in specialized niche production; that is, producing high-value crops for early harvests, in some cases one month ahead of other areas in the state. This climatic edge makes desert farming an intensely profitable industry.

The continuing success of agribusiness in California can be directly attributed to the production of specialty crops (Charts 1 and 2). These crops are possible only by employing staggering amounts of capital and labor. Over the last 20 years, production of specialty crops has come to dominate acreage and farm value in California. Fruits, nuts, vegetables, and melons accounted for 52% of the total state acreage in 2000, up from 28% in 1980. Correspondingly, at $14 billion in 2000, specialty crop values had increased to 55% of the total state agricultural value.

*1990 was an abnormal year due to extreme weather conditions.


The same pattern is even more pronounced in the desert. In 2000, the agricultural production values for the Imperial and Coachella Valleys reached $2.13 billion, about one-seventh of all specialty-crop production. The two valleys are contiguous, sharing similar ecological conditions and the same water source. Farming in the Imperial Valley is associated with winter vegetables, especially head and leaf lettuce, while the Coachella Valley is famous for its high-value, labor-intensive crops, such as citrus, dates, early table grapes, winter vegetables, and melons. The desert is also a site of experimental agriculture, where new crop varieties, cultivation procedures, and technology are developed. Agronomists are, for example, working on adapting tropical exotic fruit such as the mango to the desert in the quest for new commercial markets and profits. Table 1 shows the growth and value of specialty crop production in the Coachella Valley.

Another important desert industry dependent upon Colorado River water is tourism and recreation, which in 2000 had a revenue of over $1 billion. Since about the 1950s, the western Coachella Valley has been developed into an international playground for the wealthy. Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, and Indian Wells saw the construction of luxury hotels, country clubs, golf courses, spas, and casinos, all of which were created based on the availability and use of Colorado River water. Indeed, the mastery of water is striking, as verdant golf courses and polo grounds rise up out of oases, complete with artificial streams, ponds, and lakes. The same mild winter climate that is beneficial for crops also draws people to the desert as tourists and part-time residents. The service sector has grown accordingly, providing employees for hotels,
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citrus</td>
<td>33,844,600</td>
<td>63,855,800</td>
<td>66,216,500</td>
<td>52,441,600</td>
<td>58,383,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deciduous*</td>
<td>84,591,700</td>
<td>127,394,400</td>
<td>166,138,800</td>
<td>192,845,000</td>
<td>124,133,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables &amp; Melons</td>
<td>32,119,000</td>
<td>44,047,400</td>
<td>53,446,600</td>
<td>158,533,400</td>
<td>140,960,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$150,555,300</strong></td>
<td><strong>$235,297,600</strong></td>
<td><strong>$285,801,900</strong></td>
<td><strong>$403,820,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>$323,477,400</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes table grapes and dates.


Golf courses, and restaurants. The increasing Latino population, drawn by agriculture, have come to dominate the labor market, working as domestics, housekeepers, landscapers, groundskeepers, custodians, chefs, waiters, and dishwashers.

The two major employment sectors, agriculture and tourism, are articulated, with laborers moving between the two as they seek to maximize and improve their incomes, as well as combine seasons of employment to reach nearly year-round employment.

**Population Dynamics**

Population in the desert remained low until the expansion of agribusiness and tourism. The Imperial Valley, which at the beginning of the 20th century retained access to water, has shifted from low-value field crops such as cotton and hay to high-value winter vegetables and early summer fruits. In the Coachella Valley, where Colorado River water became available only in the early 1950s, high-value labor-intensive specialty crops have been the mainstay of production, with contemporary investors using the desert as an experimental production niche, moving in the direction of exotic crops such as dates, mangos, and early spring peaches.

In recent decades the growing population has been primarily Latino, employed not only as agricultural harvest laborers but, among other specializations, irrigators, supervisors, machine operators, managers, and land preparers. Moreover, their increasing numbers are linked with national developments such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1987, which promoted the settlement process by providing the means for laborers to apply for legal residency and later reunification with family members. Today many are seeking citizenship. Increased border control has also promoted the local settlement of migrant farm laborers, who continue to provide critical seasonal harvest labor to other regions of the state, particularly the Central Valley.

The settlement of Latinos in both the Coachella and Imperial Valleys has increased dramatically in the last 20 years (Table 2). For example, Mecca’s population nearly tripled between 1980 and 2000 through the settlement of young families, and Calipatria experienced a similar growth rate.

Work that we completed while under contract to the U.S. Census Bureau during the implementation of Census 2000 revealed that even these numbers are considerably
underestimated—the result of imperfect methods of counting and detecting dispersed Latino settlers.\(^1\) A more accurate count of Mecca’s population, for example, and its immediate hinterland adds up to 8,000 to 9,000 people, three to four thousand more than the census count. Similar developments have been observed in nearby towns like Oasis and Thermal. As the growth of population is fueled by the settlement of Latino immigrants, Latinos have become the population majority in desert communities. Mecca, with a Latino population of 98%, provides a compelling example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City or CDP*</th>
<th>Population 1980</th>
<th>Population 1990</th>
<th>Population 2000</th>
<th>Foreign-born people (%)</th>
<th>People aged 17 and under (%)</th>
<th>Median Age (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population (% Latino)</td>
<td>Total Population (% Latino)</td>
<td>Total Population (% Latino)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachella</td>
<td>9,129 (89.3)</td>
<td>16,896 (95.3)</td>
<td>22,724 (97)</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indio</td>
<td>21,611 (56.2)</td>
<td>36,793 (68.1)</td>
<td>49,116 (75)</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecca CDP</td>
<td>1,698 (88.2)</td>
<td>1,966 (95.1)</td>
<td>5,402 (98)</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brawley</td>
<td>14,946 (58.1)</td>
<td>18,923 (69.1)</td>
<td>22,052 (74)</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calexico</td>
<td>14,412 (94.1)</td>
<td>18,633 (95.6)</td>
<td>27,109 (95)</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calipatria</td>
<td>2,636 (66.8)</td>
<td>2,690 (74.2)</td>
<td>7,289 (57)</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert Shores CDP</td>
<td>n/a**</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>792 (61)</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Centro</td>
<td>23,996 (49.9)</td>
<td>31,384 (65.3)</td>
<td>37,835 (75)</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heber CDP</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2,566 (96.7)</td>
<td>2,988 (98)</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holtville</td>
<td>4,399 (47.6)</td>
<td>4,820 (62.5)</td>
<td>5,612 (74)</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial</td>
<td>3,451 (35.6)</td>
<td>4,113 (52.9)</td>
<td>7,560 (61)</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>29.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niland CDP</td>
<td>1,042 (31.2)</td>
<td>1,183 (36.1)</td>
<td>1,143 (55)</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeley CDP</td>
<td>1,058 (46.4)</td>
<td>1,228 (69.0)</td>
<td>1,624 (82)</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westmorland</td>
<td>1,590 (66.1)</td>
<td>1,380 (72.3)</td>
<td>2,131 (82)</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winterhaven CDP</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>529 (56)</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(^*\)Census Designated Place.
**\(^{**}\)n/a – not available; the data for the location were aggregated with those from county unincorporated areas.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, Summary File 1-3; Palerm 1995.

Our data corroborate the numbers of young people and children found in the two valleys, indicating that Latinos are settling as young families with children, not temporarily as itinerant single males. As a result, the median age in these communities is low. The median ages in Mecca, Coachella, and Seeley are 22.6, 22.8, and 27.2 years, respectively, which contrasts with the state’s median of 33.3 years.

Latinos have continued to settle in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys for several reasons. Foremost is the local employment for agricultural jobs and those in the service sector. But there are quality-of-life issues as well. The traditional route of rural to urban movement is no longer as

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viable as it was in the past. Immigrants today are heading directly to cities, creating a glut of laborers competing for the same low-wage jobs. Moreover, urban ills such as violence, drugs, and gang activity are dissuading rural immigrants from relocating to urban barrios. Rural areas are also attracting Latinos because of the lower costs of housing, where the possibility of becoming a homeowner is within economic reach for many low-income earners.

An important aspect in Latino settlement of the Coachella and Imperial Valleys is the proximity to the Mexican border. Imperial County lies adjacent to the border, and continues to be a crossroad for migrants and immigrants. Coachella Valley to the north is part of a migrant corridor that leads from the border by highways and interstate freeways to the Los Angeles metropolitan region. The two valleys are ideal places for farm laborers to establish bases of migration. Homes and residences are sought where farm laborers may work locally during winter harvests and then migrate to follow crops for the spring, summer, and fall. A major function of the settlement of Latinos in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys is as a staging area for the rest of California’s agricultural regions and employment markets.

**Community Dynamics**

Settlement is a process of permanent attachment to a location, and Latino farm laborers have made significant investments in establishing themselves in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys. Table 3 illustrates housing data from the Census Bureau. Heber has housing units that are owner-occupied by 72.6% of the population, while in Coachella 60.9% of the population own their residences. In Mecca, laborers buy derelict homes and refurbish them, or build custom homes after acquiring property, contributing to a 45.7% rate of owner-occupied dwellings. Many who buy homes in an area intend to live there permanently, and farm laborers are no exception.

Not only are laborers active in establishing residences, they are investing socially in the community as well. We have identified at least three avenues for social participation: schools, churches, and local government.

Parents are involved in the local schools through parent-teacher conferences, school open houses, and volunteering for after-school programs. But they are also serving on Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), deciding education policy for their children, assessing their children’s teachers, and holding positions as members of school district boards. Parents in Mecca, for example, campaigned strongly in order to get Saúl Martínez Elementary School named after a local Latino law enforcement officer who died in the line of duty.

The churches function as cornerstones of the community, vital institutions that engage residents in activities directed at community service, ranging from assistance to the less fortunate to providing positive outlets for the youth. For example, the Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Catholic Church in Mecca, built with funds raised entirely by the parish, has gained regional prominence. In responding to a Latino constituency, every December 12 the church celebrates La Fiesta del Virgen de Guadalupe, an important festival that draws thousands of Latinos from all over the desert region.
Latino immigrants are involved in local government. They sit on committees for organizations like the Desert Alliance for Community Empowerment Zone, which oversees the growth and development in desert communities. The Mecca Community Council, with an all-Latino board, works with Riverside County on community affairs.

In sum, Latino residents are invested and active citizens of their communities. The Latino settlement process in rural communities represents a wave of positive change and substantial investment. With such community investment, it is not likely that Latinos will easily or painlessly abandon these areas in the face of possible job loss resulting from the proposed water transfer. These towns are not overgrown labor camps or bedroom communities, but rather dynamic and new places with populations dedicated to improving their towns. The water transfer will be an assault on the local economy, and on the very foundations of these nascent communities. Ultimately, it is a cultural assault on the Latino people themselves. It is as if outsiders assume Latinos be passed over without consultation, quietly relocated, and forgotten in the process.

### Probable Impacts of the Proposed Water Transfer

We can only assume that any decrease in the availability of water will have far-reaching effects for desert industries and communities. Without adequate supplies of water, agribusiness and tourism could falter. Particularly vulnerable, and liable to be hit the hardest, will be cutting-edge agribusiness with crops in exotics and niche production, which are responsible for the lion’s share of the agricultural value in the crops in desert regions. Agribusiness and tourism would...
endure cutbacks, on everything from the actual size of operations and numbers of employees to reverting to extreme seasonality in production and periods of operation. Lessening the water supply will lead to risking a major downturn in the local agricultural economy, initiate a domino effect on the articulated service-sector economy, and dissipate sources of seasonal labor for other regions.

Our foremost concern is the extent to which this will have on the communities themselves. What would become of these community investments if the major economic activities of the area were to diminish? What would become of homeowners who could not maintain a schedule of mortgage payments? What will happen to the equity that they have built through homeownership? What would become of business owners who finally built up enough capital to establish their businesses, only to find that their clientele base can no longer support them? While the absentee owners and corporations that have operations in both the tourism and agribusiness industries might treat the water transfer as a business gamble, the people they employ will surely experience it as an economic crash.

Many of these communities are supplying only basic needs to their residents. However, given the increasing rates of homeowners we have described, the communities are on the path to reviving their local tax base, which could go toward underwriting expanded services. As the water transfer erodes the tax base further, basic resources such as health-care clinics and street maintenance will never be more than the bare minimum that the counties currently provide with their limited funds. In short, Latino communities will continue to be wards of the county rather than independent and self-sustaining entities.

Conclusion

Considering the various claims on Colorado River water, it is highly unlikely to expect a reversal of the announced water cutbacks and transfers. Rather, we should expect and anticipate escalating restrictions to the water supply for agriculture in the desert. At first, these restrictions will force farmers to adjust farming practices to water availability, but eventually the viability of farming in the desert will be impaired as greater amounts of water are made available to other preferred users. Agribusiness and landowners will undoubtedly need to rethink and restructure their operations in the desert. They could be compensated for their losses and troubles via special state and federal programs. They will, moreover, keep their water entitlements with which they will be able to derive considerable financial benefit.

It is unlikely, however, that the population and communities that have developed around the desert agricultural economy will receive similar attention or equal treatment. They will be expected to simply relocate to a new source of employment as an old one ends, assuming great financial loss, personal hardship, and alienation from the communities they have built. It is our opinion that these losses also need to be properly compensated via special state and federal programs. For example, possible areas of compensation are job retraining and relocation, restoration of home equity and access to affordable housing, and family reunification after dislocation. We also need to address the destruction of the budding human communities that have emerged in the desert. How do we compensate for the “sweat” equity used to build private
and public community infrastructure (i.e., homes, schools, pools, parks, social-service centers, and churches)? What do we do to protect and reward the enthusiasm for community-building so that citizens are not disheartened as they are forced to abandon their community and reinvest in another that will need rebuilding? These are important and legitimate social issues that need to be addressed as the effects of new state and federal policies begin to dismantle the economy and society that have emerged in the desert.
Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Catholic Church, Mecca

Play about the life of UFW leader Cesar Chavez, Mecca School
Students participating in a community survey, Mecca