Farmers Find Obama’s Drought Relief Efforts Lacking

SCOTT SMITH, Associated Press

President Barack Obama walks with Governor Jerry Brown, left and Joe and Maria Del Bosque, right of Empresas Del Bosque farm, addressing California's drought situation, Friday, Feb. 14, 2014 in Los Banos, Calif. Farmers in California's drought-stricken Central Valley said the financial assistance President Barack Obama delivered on his visit Friday does not get to the heart of California's long-term water problems. **(AP Photo/Los Angeles Times, Wally Skalij, Pool)**

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — Farmers in California's drought-stricken Central Valley said the financial assistance President Barack Obama delivered on his visit Friday does not get to the heart of California's long-term water problems.

Amid one of the driest years in the state's recorded history, Obama came to the Fresno area to announce $100 million in livestock-disaster aid [1], $60 million to support food banks and another $13 million toward things such as conservation and helping rural communities that could soon run out of drinking water.

Obama told reporters in the rural town of Firebaugh, where he met with community leaders, that he wasn't about to wade into California water politics. Yet the president gently warned California's leaders to find common ground rather than thinking of water as a "zero-sum game."

"We're going to have to figure out how to play a different game," Obama said. "If the politics are structured in such a way where everybody is fighting each other and trying to get as much as they can, my suspicion is that we're not going to make much progress."

In his three-hour visit to the Central Valley, Obama also toured a farm in Los Banos to see the drought's impact firsthand.

Another farmer, Sarah Woolf, a partner with Clark Brothers Farming, said anything will help, but the federal government needs to better manage the state's water

supplies so farmers have enough during future droughts like the current one.

"Throwing money at it is not going to solve the problem long-term," she said.

The Central Valley produces nearly one-third of the nation's fruits and vegetables, and Fresno County leads the nation in agriculture. Ryan Jacobsen, executive director of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, estimated that 25 percent of the county's irrigated land will go unplanted this year.

The drought [2] has caused Democrats and Republicans in Congress to propose dueling emergency bills. Led by Republican Rep. Devin Nunes, the House passed one that would free up water for farmers by rolling back environmental protections and stop the restoration of a dried-up stretch of the San Joaquin River that once had salmon runs.

Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer proposed their own version that pours $300 million into drought-relief projects without changing environmental laws. The bill would allow more flexibility to move water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to farms in the south and speed up environmental reviews of water projects.

Mark Borba said he wasn't invited to share his story with the president. His family's Borba Farms won't plant one-third of the 11,000 acres of almonds, tomatoes, garlic, lettuce, onions and much more they typically grow. Borba said the president could ease this year's drought hardship on farmers by relaxing federal environmental regulations within the boundaries of the law intended to protect endangered fish.

"We don't want money," Borba said. "We don't want a handout."

Not everybody dismissed Obama's announcement. Rick Palermo of the Community Food Bank in Fresno said he expects that the drought will lengthen lines in three Central Valley counties he serves. The Fresno food bank expects to receive some of the president's money, but his worry is that the donations they get from farmers may be lacking.

About half of the 30 million pounds of food they distribute each year is grown in the Central Valley, he said.

"If folks aren't growing it, there's a good chance we're not going to get the type of donations we need," Palermo said. "It's a dual impact on us."

Members of least one environmental group converged on Fresno to voice their positions on California's divisive struggles over water. Members of Restore the Delta, a grassroots environmental organization based in Stockton, oppose Gov. Jerry Brown's multibillion-dollar twin-tunnels proposal for diverting water around the delta for use on farms.

Executive Director Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla said her group didn't come to protest, but rather to try to educate the president.

"President Obama should not be misled," she said. "We implore him not to support this boondoggle."

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Associated Press reporter Darlene Superville contributed.

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