

Sacramento rally focuses on connection between water, jobs

Contributed by Susanne La Faver
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SACRAMENTO — “Action now on water” was the message to legislators late last month when more than 1,600 members of the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) rallied under a blistering sun on Sacramento’s capitol steps.

Renowned television host Huell Howser led the rally, attended also by children of farm workers in the Central Valley community of Mendota where unemployment is 40 percent.

“Every economic sector is impacted by the lack of water supply reliability,” said Timothy Quinn, ACWA executive director. “Whether it’s farmers forced to abandon fields, agricultural workers losing their jobs, causing economic upheaval for rural communities, or businesses and development threatened by the inability to assure reliable water supplies. We need action now on water.”

The rally coincided with ACWA’s 2009 spring conference in Sacramento where a statewide issue forum discussed the impact of California’s water crisis on the state’s economy. Panelists spoke of the need for a comprehensive, long-term statewide water strategy and immediate action by the legislature and governor.

California Building Industry Association President and CEO Robert Rivinius said the lack of water infrastructure and available water impacts new housing.

“Construction is down 80 percent from 2005, with housing at 44,000 units, the lowest since WW II. Building trades unemployment is down 70 to 80 percent,” he said. “We support an \$11 billion water bond to come to grips with California’s water needs.”

According to California Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Allan Zaremborg, the Peripheral Canal must be built. The canal would divert water from the Sacramento River to Central and Southern California.

California voters defeated a ballot initiative to build the Canal in 1982, but the idea of a Peripheral Canal has had a revival.

Water is currently pulled through the San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta, turning the Delta, originally a fluctuating-salinity estuary, into a freshwater basin. It has also created unnatural north to south flows in the Delta, confusing native species such as the Delta Smelt and disturbing the ecosystem.

“We need safe drinking water. The solution is a bond that provides mitigation funding and public benefit,” said Zaremborg. “But, public distrust for state legislators is so high; I’m concerned a bond wouldn’t pass.”

California farmers were represented by panelist Dave Puglia, senior vice president, governmental affairs and communications, Western Growers Association.

“Farmers are at the front-end of this water crisis with \$350 million lost this year. One-hundred-thousand acres went fallow because of a lack of water in 2008, next year it will be worse,” said Puglia. “The west side of Fresno, Kings and San Joaquin counties is essentially a desert due to the erosion of top soil. It’s becoming another dust bowl.”

He added, “Growers anticipated shortened water deliveries and maximized water efficiencies. They’re resilient and take a lot before walking away from their businesses. It becomes impossible when they no longer can service debt on the water infrastructure they purchased.”

Puglia said agriculture provides fresh food and jobs. “Consumers increasingly get their produce from Mexico as California farmers move operations south.

“Without water, California loses out on local food and economic benefits provided by farmers,” he said. For more information about AWCA or its 2009 spring conference, see www.acwa.com.