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Supervisor
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Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Water and Power
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

*Extinction is not a Sustainable Water Policy:
The Bay-Delta Crisis and the
Implications for California Water Management
July 2, 2007*

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Phil Larson, and I am a member of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Fresno. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the current crisis in the Delta. I speak with unanimous support from my colleagues on the Board of Supervisor, as evident in a letter we submitted to Gov. Schwarzenegger regarding this issue (attachment A). This crisis is commonly seen as a very costly and damaging collision between the environment and the water management system that is the key to the future of California's rural and urban economies. Indeed, the future of our way of life is at stake. This crisis should be viewed as the first of many conflicts in the Delta where the dream that is California hangs in balance.

I was first elected to represent District One of Fresno County in November 2002 and was re-elected in June of 2006. District One includes the rich and productive farmland in the western portion of the county all the way to the San Benito County line. As a lifelong farmer and former president of the Fresno County Farm Bureau, I continue to fight for safe and secure water supplies in our region because I know without additional water supplies the social, cultural and economic impacts to our region could be devastating.

Fresno County is blessed to have rich soils and a climate that is ideal for irrigated agriculture. The hard work of farmers who came to Fresno County from all over the world has made the County the richest and most productive agricultural county in America. Our gross agriculture production value in 2006 exceeded the four billion-dollar mark for the fifth consecutive year. The County leads the nation in number of farms

(6,592), farms with sales of \$100,000 or more (2,321) and harvested cropland (1.16 million acres).

Water in western Fresno County is delivered through the Westlands Water District via the Central Valley Project. Westlands encompasses more than 600,000 acres of farmland in western Fresno and Kings Counties. The District serves approximately 600 family-owned farms that average 900 acres in size. Westlands' farmers produce more than 60 high quality commercial food and fiber crops sold for the fresh, dry, canned and frozen food markets, both domestic and export. In addition, more than 50,000 live and work in the communities dependent on the District's agricultural economy. The communities in and near the District's boundaries include Mendota, Huron, Tranquillity, Firebaugh, Three Rocks, Cantua Creek, Helm, San Joaquin, Kerman, Lemoore and Coalinga, most of which are in my district.

The water provided by Westlands is conveyed through the Sacramento – San Joaquin Rivers Delta and pumped from the Delta at the C. W. “Bill” Jones Pumping Plant. When diversions at the Jones Pumping Plant are reduced to avoid the take of a listed species like the Delta smelt the effects on farming and the economy of Fresno County are dramatic and devastating. For example, there are farmers on the westside of Fresno County who this year have plowed-under their growing crops because they lack adequate supplies of water to irrigate those crops to maturity. The shortage of water is not due to drought or other climatic conditions. Although 2007 has been a dry year, the two preceding years were wet and storage in Central Valley Project reservoirs north of the

Delta at the beginning of the water years was above average. Rather, the water shortages that have caused farmers to plow-under their crops was caused by restrictions on the operations of the Delta export pumps, including the complete shut down of the Harvey O. Banks Pumping Plant, to protect the Delta smelt. Immediate action must be taken to prevent the economic disaster this can bring and we must work together to find a long term solution that will help us avoid a similar crisis in the future.

The consequences of such action affect more than just the farmers who have lost their crops and their investment in those crops. Such actions affect farm workers who will not be employed to complete the production and harvest of those crops and small businesses that exist to provide goods and services to support the activities of farms in western Fresno County. While recognizing the importance of maintaining a healthy eco-system, it must be balanced with the economic impacts. There is a very human face to the decisions that are made. Last winter, Fresno County's agriculture was impacted by a naturally occurring disaster – the Freeze of 2007. The impacts on people were real and I believe that it will mirror the potential impacts of limiting the water flow through the Delta.

Fresno County freeze related agricultural losses were over \$111 million. But the real story is how those losses directly impacted families. Freeze related Unemployment claims in Fresno County were 1805 matched with Tulare County 3168 – we had 5000 Unemployment claims filed – and that does not account for those who did not file because of “legal status” concerns. Assistance provided by La Cooperativa Campesinos

de California via Employment Development Department (EDD) Grants serviced 1,114 participants, utility payments of \$50,162, rental \$260,602, and mortgage \$55,679 for a total of \$366, 443. The total for Tulare County exceeded \$1.1 million and the state total was over \$3 million (attachment B). Since January, the Fresno Community Food Bank has served approximately 64,359 individuals, a total of 689,841 pounds of food distributed (attachment C).

To put a clearer face on what impact agricultural losses have on real families, the Cornerstone Church and Fresno County EOC were still distributing on May 27, 2007 more than 4,000 boxes of food to the freeze impacted community of Orange Cove. This was a continuation of the more than 10,000 boxes of food distributed in three other efforts (attachment D). On the Westside of Fresno County, the communities and residents of Firebaugh, Mendota, Tranquillity, San Joaquin, and Huron, are directly impacted by agriculture. These communities are predominately Hispanic and already live below the poverty line. Mendota is a city with a 7,800 population and average household size of 4.32. Many of these families struggle to survive off an annual median household income of \$23,700 (attachment E). The surrounding cities and unincorporated communities in my district share similar demographics and economic hardships.

As water reductions have occurred – quality of life has been impacted. Most of the folks that live in the region are agricultural workers. Many have been employed by the same farming operations for generations. I wish I could have you meet some of them. They are hardworking and proud people who love working the land, provide for their families,

and are living the challenges of the changes that are impacting agriculture. I hope that you can understand that the answer to serving their needs is not moving them to cities – placing them within our over burdened social welfare system. It is providing them with the opportunity to earn a living, allowing them to maintain their family structure so that they can educate their children and prepare for the changes that will occur in farming. It has always struck me as ironic that groups who advocate for “environmental justice” support reduced diversions from the Delta to protect fish species without regard to the effect inadequate water supplies have on the low-income, minority population of western Fresno County.

By my comments I do not want to suggest that protecting the Delta smelt from extinction is unimportant. Rather, I mean to convey that we must find the means to provide adequate water supplies to support the agricultural economy of the San Joaquin Valley that does not conflict with efforts to protect this and other species of concern in the Delta. Such means do exist. For instance, I have read many comments from experts like Dr. Peter Moyle that one way to avoid the conflict between protecting fish and supplying water for agriculture is to move the intakes of the State Water Project and the Central Valley Project out of the southern Delta, to an area along the Sacramento River south of the City of Sacramento. I am afraid that if something like this is not done, the prediction of Lester Snow, the Director of the California Department of Water Resources will come true. He has stated as recently as mid-June that if we do not find some means of fixing the Delta conveyance problem, we will face on an annual basis water supply shortages of

the type that caused farmers in my supervisorial district to plow-under their growing crops.

The leadership of the federal and state governments is faced with a fundamental question: Do we want to preserve the agricultural economy of this state? As you probably could guess, my answer to that question is yes. From my perspective, protecting our ability to produce domestic food supplies rises to the level of a national security interest. Difficult decisions, which may be unpopular in some quarters, will have to be made if we are to protect a safe and reliable food supply, while providing jobs and serving as the economic engine of our state. While we all agree that extinction of species like the Delta smelt is not a sustainable water policy, we must work together to find a solution that supports the economy of California and the ability of our farmers to feed and cloth the nation and the world, while preserving our ecosystem.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to respond to questions.

DISCLOSURE REQUIREMENT
Required by House Rule XI, clause 2(g)
And Rules of the Committee on Resources

A. This part is to be completed by all witnesses:

1. Name: *John P. (Phil) Larson*
2. Business Address: *2281 Tulare, Room 300 Fresno CA 93721*
3. Business Phone Number: *(559) 488-3541*
4. Organization you are representing: *Fresno County Board of Supervisors*
5. Any training or educational certificates, diplomas or degrees or other educational experiences which add to your qualifications to testify on or knowledge of the subject matter of the hearing: *Not applicable*
6. Any professional licenses, certifications, or affiliations held which are relevant to your qualifications to testify on or knowledge of the subject matter of the hearing: *California State License – Pest Control Advisor 1974 – 2002: Past Board member – California State Farm Bureau: Past President – Fresno County Farm Bureau: Past Board member – California Production Consultants Association*
7. Any employment, occupation, ownership in a firm or business, or work-related experiences which relate to your qualifications to testify on or knowledge of the subject matter of the hearing: *43 year owner/operator of family farm.*
8. Any offices, elected positions, or representational capacity held in the organization on whose behalf you are testifying: *Currently Elected member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors – District One*

B. To be completed by nongovernmental witness only:

1. Any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) from the Department of the Interior which you have received since October 1, 2000, including the source and the amount of each grant or contract. *Not applicable*
2. Any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) the Department of the interior which were received since October 1, 2000 by the organization(s) which you represent at this hearing, including the source and amount of each grant or contract: *Not applicable*
3. Any other information you wish to convey which might aid the members of the Committee to better understand the context of your testimony: *Not applicable*