

One kind of drought ends for California farms, but another — of immigrants to work in the fields — now looms

Yahoo News, by Holly Bailey, May 5, 2017

FIREBAUGH, Calif. — There were moments when Joe Del Bosque wondered if his farm could survive.

For six long years, Del Bosque, the son of migrant farmworkers who has worked the land his entire life, watched as his 2,000-acre farm here in California's Central Valley slowly dried up, the victim of a near-biblical drought that many likened to a modern version of the Dust Bowl, when every single drop of water was a precious commodity.

It was here on one of Del Bosque's dusty, barren cantaloupe fields that President Barack Obama strolled on a Friday afternoon three years ago to illustrate his call for action on climate change. Del Bosque had invited the president in the hopes he might wade into the tricky politics of California's water allocation rules to ease environmental regulations, giving farmers more access to what little water the state did have. It didn't happen, but the visit made Del Bosque the face of a drought that threatened to destroy farming in a region that provides half the nation's fruit and vegetables.

Then something miraculous happened. Late last year, all over California, it began to rain, and in the Sierra Nevada, it began to snow — historic storms that replenished streams and reservoirs that supply water for much of the state. Suddenly, the Central Valley was green and lush, the soil fertile and fully ready for planting in a way that farmers hadn't experienced since 2011. But with the passing of one crisis came another worry.

"Now we have the water we need," Del Bosque said on a recent afternoon as he walked a reporter through a melon field he was getting ready to plant. "But now I don't know if we have the people we need to pick the crops."

President Trump's pledge to crack down on illegal immigration has sent chills through the Central Valley, where farmers like Del Bosque rely heavily on migrant farm labor to plant, tend and pick their crops. Though there's no complete tally, a recent Department of Agriculture study estimated that nearly 60 percent of California's farm laborers are "unauthorized" to work in the U.S. — a number that has steadily increased over the years as farmers have struggled to find those willing to do the jobs.

But the farm labor force got smaller and more competitive in recent years as the Obama administration stepped up the pace of deportations for those in the country illegally. And Trump's rhetoric and more frequent immigration raids in recent months, including in California, has scared some migrant workers into staying away from the fields in the Central Valley — fearful they could be arrested and deported for doing jobs that farmers say are crucial to producing the food that feeds much of the nation.

At Del Bosque's farm, where he is harvesting asparagus and planting his cantaloupes, he has struggled to fully staff his crews in recent weeks. Though unemployment is high across the Central Valley and the job pays at least minimum wage, farm labor is grueling work that most Americans are unwilling to do. He usually hires temporary workers who live in nearby towns like Mendota, a small farming community that for generations has been a magnet for Mexican laborers who come to California to work the fields to support their families back home. But many of the workers Del Bosque has hired before have vanished, forcing him to expand his search to other parts of the region, as far as an hour away.

“Ten years ago, people would just show up and ask for work. We never had any trouble finding people. We never had to worry,” Del Bosque said. “But now we are struggling. There’s not enough people, and there’s lots of competition, not just from farmers here but from people on the coast like Salinas and Watsonville, who are coming over to try and hire our workers because they can’t find people there.”

It’s the same story all over the valley. Citrus producers, who often handpick their fruit to prevent bruising, have struggled to find workers amid the spring’s harvest. Local officials say crops like strawberries and blueberries may be down this year — not because of lack of land or demand, but because farmers can’t find people to tend them. And that could drive up the cost of food.

The labor shortage has prompted mixed feelings among farmers in the valley, who overwhelmingly backed Trump in November. In a state that is a bright bastion of blue, the Central Valley largely went for Trump. He easily carried Kern, Kings and Tulare counties — three of California’s most agricultural counties.

Farmers here were openly torn about the campaign. More Republican and conservative than the electorate in other parts of the state, many farmers couldn’t stomach the idea of voting for Hillary Clinton. But they were also conflicted about Trump’s tough rhetoric on immigration and his promises to roll back trade deals, a move that could dramatically hurt their export markets.

But Trump ultimately won over many farmers. In his two visits to the region last year, the New York businessman vowed to do what Obama did not — to directly intervene in California’s water policies for the benefit of agriculture (at the expense, environmentalists say, of the ecology of a good part of the state). But the crucial turning point came at a fundraiser in Tulare last August, where those in attendance say he indicated to a crowd of mostly farmers that he would be open to the idea of a worker program for farm laborers in the country illegally.

That was a direct contradiction to what Trump had argued publicly — including his position that he would deport all illegal immigrants in the country before considering any kind of worker program, a move farmers say would kill agriculture in California. But like many of his supporters, farmers here believed Trump in office would be more moderate on the issue than his campaign rhetoric suggested.

But in his first months in the White House, Trump has given no indication of compromise on the issue, doubling down on his promise to deport undocumented immigrants. Just days after taking office he signed an executive order decreeing that Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents should fully apply federal immigration laws already on the books — an order that many have interpreted as giving ICE newfound freedom to go after illegal immigrants.

After a series of high-profile raids in California, Texas and New York, Trump bragged that his administration has been focused on deporting the “bad guys,” including hardened criminals and drug dealers. But a recent Washington Post report found that most of those apprehended had traffic violations or no criminal record at all — fueling fears here that even illegal immigrants trying to live and work quietly could be at risk for arrest.

The rhetoric and the new policy are upsetting farmers here who backed Trump. More than a dozen who publicly supported the candidate, including several who attended his Tulare fundraiser, declined to comment on the president’s immigration policies — including one who said publicly disagreeing with Trump and his team “wouldn’t help our cause.”

Still, many point to one sign of hope: Trump’s close relationship with House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who represents Bakersfield. In February, McCarthy, who is said to

Del Bosque speaks regularly with Trump and is close to the president's son-in-law and top adviser, Jared Kushner, told the New York Times that "some sort of guest workers' program" was essential to immigration reform.

For Del Bosque, Trump presents a dilemma. In recent years, Del Bosque has made it a goal to talk to as many people as possible about the importance of California's agriculture industry and the policies that affect farmers like him. Obama's 2014 visit was the result of a Twitter message he sent to the president, which caught the eye of White House staffers. But Del Bosque, who is Mexican-American, has mixed feelings about hosting Trump, given the president's rhetoric on immigration.

In his office overlooking an almond orchard in bloom, Del Bosque cited his laborers, who, like his parents, came here to work hard and support their families. His wife of more than 40 years, Maria Gloria, who helps him run the farm, came to the U.S. illegally with her parents to work in the fields. What would it say to them if he were to host a man who has regularly demeaned people like them?

"These people look up to me. They know me as someone who fights, fights for water, fights for the farm," he said. "Our people feel like we protect them, and that's true. We do."

Last summer, Del Bosque was invited to serve on an agricultural advisory board for Trump. But he turned down the opportunity to meet with the GOP nominee, in part out of loyalty to his workers. It wasn't about political allegiance. In November, he didn't vote for Clinton or Trump because he felt neither one represented his interests. "I threw my vote away, which in California doesn't mean anything because Hillary was going to win anyway," he said.

But now that Trump has taken office, Del Bosque is considering sending an invitation to the president to come to his farm — maybe even by Twitter, as he did with Obama. Though he doesn't agree with Trump and is scared of the impact his policies could have on his farm and his workers, he thinks the president should see a working farm up close — including the undocumented Mexicans who toil in the fields here.

"Does he know where his food comes from? Has he ever been to a farm?" Del Bosque asked. "I don't think he has any idea how it works. And he needs to."