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SPECIAL REPORT:
**Retiring Toxic Farmland in Western San Joaquin Valley Would
Save Water, Environment and Taxpayer Money**

*Land retirement 25x cheaper than Tunnel plan and could save 455,000 acre-feet of
water*

Sacramento, CA - A [new report by EcoNorthwest](#), an independent economic analysis firm, estimates that 300,000 acres of toxic land in the Westlands Water District and three adjacent water districts could be retired at a cost of \$580 million to \$1 billion.

Retiring this land and curbing the water rights associated with it would result in a savings to California of up to 455,000 acre-feet of water – for reference, the [City of Los Angeles uses 587,000 acre-feet in a typical year](#). This course of action also is significantly less expensive than Governor Jerry Brown's plan to build a massive tunnel system to divert water from the Sacramento River for the benefit of corporate agribusiness.

Food & Water Watch, the California Water Impact Network (C-WIN) and Restore the Delta are calling on the Obama administration to retire up to 300,000 acres of selenium-tainted land and reduce the annual supply of water in the San Luis Unit, which includes parts of Westlands, San Luis, Panoche and Pacheco water districts, by 455,000 acre-feet. (This water is typically pumped from the San Francisco Bay Delta via the federal controlled Central Valley Project.) The Delta is suffering from poor water quality because of the removal of fresh water to irrigate water-intensive crops such as almonds and pistachios in the Westlands Water District, located on the hot and dry western side of the San Joaquin Valley.

“California needs to balance water demands with the realities of its supply, which means retiring inappropriate farmland,” said Adam Scow, California Director at Food & Water Watch. “Retiring toxic farmland in Westlands is a commonsense step toward protecting our overstretched and dwindling water supply.”

The report comes as the Obama administration and Westlands engage in secret negotiations over the fate of this toxic land; central to the discussions is millions of dollars in debt owed by Westlands to U.S. taxpayers for the faulty and incomplete construction of the Central Valley Project, which supplies water to the district.

The disastrous consequences of industrial-scale cultivation of seleniferous lands became

obvious in 1983, when thousands of migratory waterfowl were deformed or killed outright at Kesterson Wildlife Refuge due to deliveries of toxic drain water from Westlands Water District megafarms.

A recent draft settlement revealed that the Obama administration has proposed guaranteeing Westlands nearly 900,000 acre-feet of water per year for fifty years, while letting the district off the hook for \$365 million of its debt. The proposed deal would provide for the continued irrigation of more than 250,000 acres of selenium-tainted lands, allowing toxic runoff to continue plaguing the San Joaquin River and the Bay-Delta/Estuary. A final settlement proposal is expected soon. The Environmental Working Group estimated that annual [subsidies to Westlands range from \\$24 million to \\$110 million](#) a year.

“Discharge into the San Joaquin River harms Bay-Delta drinking water supplies, family farms, fish and wildlife,” said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla of Restore the Delta. “Everyone knows land retirement will need to happen eventually because there will come a point where the drainage-impaired lands will become unfarmable.”

The three groups noted that the retirement of these poisoned lands and the “paper water” that goes with them would greatly reduce the toxic drainage currently poisoning the San Joaquin River and the San Francisco Bay/Delta Estuary.

Along with retiring the land, the groups are calling on Governor Brown and the State Water Board to stop the “paper water” claims that run with the land – the disparity that exists between water rights claims and water that actually exists. Currently, the State Water Resources Control Board has allocated water rights claims that exceed available water from the Delta watershed by a factor of five.

“The retirement must be accompanied by a proportional reduction in water contract amounts,” said Tom Stokely of C-WIN. “UC Davis has demonstrated that California water demands are vastly out of balance with the realities of our supply: it’s no more than ‘paper water.’ To guarantee Westlands a fifty-year water supply, as the current settlement does, would be an unfair and irresponsible giveaway to heavily-subsidized, corporate farms in Westlands.”

In a previous land retirement deal, Westlands’ water supply allocation was not reduced. A concern shared by the three groups is that under the deal, corporate farms might sell their taxpayer-subsidized water for private profit at the expense of the environment.

“We cannot permit Westlands to transform itself from heavily subsidized corporate farms into a water broker at the expense of taxpayers and the San Francisco Bay/Delta Estuary,” said Barrigan-Parrilla.

In addition, given the likelihood that land retirement would eliminate farm jobs tied to that land, the three groups recommend that those farmworkers be compensated fairly for their losses and that public funds be made available for that purpose.

As leading opponents to Governor Jerry Brown’s proposal to build massive tunnels to divert the Sacramento River, the groups emphasized the cost savings to Californians

represented by retiring these toxic lands.

“Spending one billion dollars to take these selenium-laced, unsustainable lands out of production and cutting the water rights that go with them saves Californians water money,” said Scow of Food & Water Watch. “Retiring these west side lands makes a lot more sense than spending \$67 billion to build Governor Brown’s outdated tunnels to support corporate agribusiness.”

[Read the EcoNorthwest Report](#)

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The **California Water Impact Network** (C-WIN, online at www.c-win.org) promotes the just and environmentally sustainable use of California's water, including instream flows and groundwater reserves, through research, planning, media outreach, and litigation. www.c-win.org

Restore the Delta is a 20,000-member grassroots organization committed to making the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta fishable, swimmable, drinkable, and farmable to benefit all of California. Restore the Delta's mission is to save and restore the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary for our children and future generations. www.restorethedelta.org

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