

## **Food is now a priority Families feel the effects of drought**

FIREBAUGH -- Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea doesn't mince words in describing the San Joaquín Valley's double-digit unemployment, bare kitchen pantries, and food banks' dwindling supplies: "It is a crisis."

Perea joins a growing list of local, county, and state government officials that are scrambling to find ways to bring immediate relief to Central Valley communities that have been crippled by both the country's economic recession and the state's three-year drought.

And they must act fast.

For evidence of the mounting crisis, government officials need to look no further than a food distribution held last Friday afternoon at Firebaugh's community center.

Leaving the food giveaway was Mayra Gómez, who struggled to carry both her 10-month-old daughter and multiple boxes of food. Gómez and her husband, both unemployed farmworkers from Mendota, have five children.

The food Gómez received at the giveaway -- one chicken, ground turkey, fresh and canned vegetables, boxes of beans, rice and pasta -- would fill her cupboards, which were practically empty.

More than 500 other families also attended the food giveaway, sponsored by the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission, the Community Food Bank, and the City of Firebaugh, and many of the people at the community center told similar stories.

They were unemployed farmworkers, who could not find work due to the drought. And they were parents, who had only beans, rice, and tortillas to feed their children.

The families' food needs worry food bank officials, who must balance dwindling supplies with a ballooning demand.

In just the past year, the Fresno-based Community Food Bank has gone from providing about 400,000 pounds of food a month to families in Fresno, Madera and Kings counties, to more than one million pounds of food a month, according to Dayatra Latin, director of operations for the food bank.

And in the past six months, the need for food has tripled in Firebaugh, Mendota, San Joaquín, Huron and Coalinga, Latin said.

At this point, she said, the food bank distributes about a truckload of beans and a truckload of rice, each worth about \$30,000, on a monthly basis.

But product and monetary donations to the food bank have not increased at the same rate, she said.

"Our cupboards are not empty," Latin said. She said the food bank had Gatorade, Capri Sun, and "70 pounds of Kool Aid."

"That's the kind of stuff that gets donated," she said.

What the organization needs, she said, is for manufacturers to donate diet staples, like beans, rice, flour, tortillas, and canned fruits and vegetables.

She said monetary donations are also greatly appreciated.

"We could do more if we had more," Latin said.

Other organizations are trying to fill that void.

The Fresno County EOC has responded to the increased levels of unemployment and poverty in the west side by organizing food distributions in communities like Firebaugh and Mendota.

The organization has also launched the EOC Crisis Relief Fund Web site, at [www.eoccrisisrelieffund.org](http://www.eoccrisisrelieffund.org).

Funds raised through the Web site will allow the EOC to continue organizing food distributions, and will also allow the organization to assist people struggling to pay the rent and bills.

"The more money we get, the more food distributions we can do," said Gabriela Romero of the EOC.

Meanwhile, Perea hopes that passing a county resolution declaring the region in a state of emergency could bring some immediate relief to the Valley.

With this action, he said, the Valley might be able to obtain some of the food the state keeps in reserves for disaster situations.

Other elected officials are also trying to help.

Congressmen Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, have asked President Barack Obama to declare the San Joaquín Valley the first recipient of a federal economic disaster designation.

Costa said the combination of high foreclosure rates, a lasting drought, and a drop in dairy prices has severely impacted the Valley.

"While there are many parts of our nation feeling the effects of a poor economy, the San Joaquín Valley is seeing disproportionate levels of unemployment and foreclosures, almost at greater rates than any region in America," Costa said in a statement.

On Friday afternoon, Firebaugh city manager José Antonio Ramírez observed the long line of people queued up to receive a free box of food. For his city, food distributions are only a temporary solution.

His community also needs long-term solutions that will both ease the city's reliance on agriculture and ensure that future droughts do not have such a devastating impact, he said.

Firebaugh, a city of about 5,700 people, is about 87.5 percent Latino, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The city's unemployment rate is 26.5 percent, according to the latest figures available from the Employment Development Department.

"Agriculture will always be the backbone of this community," Ramírez said, but he added that he is working hard to bring year-round employment opportunities to Firebaugh.

He said the city needs more processing plants, like Firebaugh-based Toma-Tek, which specializes in tomato processing and packaging, and more agriculture-related companies; like Queen Gil, an irrigation company in Firebaugh; and Olam International, a dehydration plant also located in the city.

Companies like these, he said, provide area residents with steady employment and ensure that the city is "not going to be dependent on one specific crop."

But if water regulations don't change, Ramírez said, "it doesn't matter what we do on the diversification side."

"Water is economic development," he said. "Water is life."

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