

Farmers try political force to open Calif.'s taps

By Michael Wines and Jennifer Medina, New York Times

FIVE POINTS – The message that Maria L. Gutierrez gave legislators on Capitol Hill was anguished and blunt: California's historic drought had not merely left farmland idle. It had destroyed Latino farm workers' jobs, shuttered Latino businesses and thrown Latino families on the street. Yet Congress had turned a deaf ear to their pleas for more water to revive farming and farm labor.

So Latinos – the nation's fastest-growing ethnic group, she noted pointedly – were sending a warning that politicians could not ignore.

"We created an organization that's called El Agua Es Asunto de Todos – Water Is Everybody's Business – so the Latino voice can be heard," Ms. Gutierrez, who described herself as an El Agua volunteer, said in October 2013 at the meeting with lawmakers. "Don't devastate our economy. Don't take our jobs away."

The group has since blanketed California with demands for more water on Spanish-language television, on the Internet, even on yard signs. But for whom it speaks is another matter: El Agua is bankrolled by more than \$1.1 million from the Westlands Water District, the nation's largest agricultural irrigation contractor, a state entity created at the behest of – and largely controlled by – some of California's wealthiest and most politically influential farmers.

For almost five decades, Westlands has brought its farmers a torrent of water from the reservoirs and aqueducts of the federal Central Valley Project, the vast public work that irrigates half of California agriculture. Drought has reduced

that torrent to drops, and El Agua is one part of Westlands' wide-ranging effort to open the spigots again.

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