

Dry future weighs heavy on Calif. ag

By Sena Christian, High Country News

On a hot summer afternoon, California farmer Chris Hurd barrels down a country road through the Central Valley city of Firebaugh, his dog Frank riding in the truck bed. He lurches to a stop in front of Oro Loma Elementary School, which was built in the 1950s to accommodate an influx of farmers' and farmworkers' children. "All three of my sons went here," Hurd says, as we walk through overgrown weeds toward the shuttered building, closed in 2010. "I was on the school board, the grass was green, kids were running around. Now it's a pile of rubble."

Agricultural land stretches out in every direction. Most of the town's 8,300 residents are involved in growing or packing produce. The city is on the west side of the San Joaquin River, an area hit particularly hard by a historic drought, now in its fifth year. Wells have run dry and farm-related jobs are running out. Many other places in the eight counties comprising the San Joaquin Valley have suffered similar fates. These areas were disadvantaged to begin with, rural and isolated, lacking infrastructure, public transportation and safe housing. Persistent drought has compounded the struggles of some of the poorest communities in the nation.

As of late January, 64 percent of the state was experiencing extreme drought – down from 78 percent that time last year. But even a stellar El Niño year won't undo all the damage.

Economically, California remains the largest agricultural producer in the United States. But El Niño's precipitation notwithstanding, the prolonged drought is putting some farmers under heavy duress, and no one is sure how far California's

Eden will sink.

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