

## Welcome to Fairmead, California, Where You Have to Walk a Mile for a Sip of Water

*For some Californians the drought means brown lawns. For others, it means nothing to drink.*

Sasha Abramsky  
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The tiny, dusty town of Fairmead, California, feels a long way from anywhere. It's the kind of place where people come to start anew, hoping to silence the ghosts of hard times past. There are the African-Americans whose families migrated out of the segregated Deep South more than half a century ago, looking for farmwork and a place where they could hold their heads high. There are the migrants from Mexico, who came in search of a slightly better life than the one they had left south of the border. There are the Anglo descendants of refugees from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl. And there are elderly adventurers looking for something new—for a little land and a lot of quiet in which to live out their fixed-income retirements.

Fairmead is unincorporated. It used to have a mill, a library, a hotel, and a small store, as well as a handful of restaurants. None of these remain. Located a few miles from the prison town of Chowchilla, Fairmead today has a *Last Picture Show* feel to it. It boasts a small elementary school, a Head Start program, a couple of churches, and a population of roughly 1,400, spread out along miles of rural back roads. The town's avenues are numbered instead of named—some of them paved, others simply bumpy lanes of gravel and stone. They stretch out from what passes for the town center—a few neat streets lined by bungalows and ranch houses, with a city well and a recently built water-storage tank at its heart—into the orchards beyond.

These days, while the almond orchards are kept a perfect green, the surrounding landscape is a dull brown, and the yards in front of most of the houses are little more than dirt and weeds. At least 25 families have seen their wells go dry in recent months. Many others are rationing what little water remains. Those lucky enough to be on the city's system still have to strictly conserve to keep the town's only well from going dry.

Not that they want to use any more of the city's water than they absolutely have to: The water quality is so bad in Fairmead, where tap water flows a milky white, that even those on the city well prefer to drink bottled water. Mostly low-income, they spend tens or even hundreds of dollars each month on drinking water, and many dollars more on gas to drive their cars out of town to someplace where the water quality is better, so that they can fill up large containers with safe water to use for showering, washing dishes, and watering their gardens.

Flossie Ford-Hedrington, a longtime grape and cotton picker—like many of her neighbors, she says she started picking as a little girl—is one of those without water. She lives in a tumbledown house, with a ripped-canvas roof and several boarded-up windows, on Avenue 18½ on the edge of an almond orchard. Behind the main house is a mobile home,



antiquated, wounded, the crooked wooden walls long ago having given up any pretense at symmetry. Next to it is her little well, which stopped producing water last year. "It's a big change," she says. "There's no faucets to turn on, honey. I cry. Because I don't have nothing."

Ford-Hedrington came here at the age of 6, when her family migrated from Louisiana. Now 59, she is hobbled by severe asthma—a common complaint in California's dusty, hyper-polluted Central Valley—as well as high blood pressure and stomach problems. On the day I met her, she had just gotten out of the hospital. Yet each day, Ford-Hedrington has to walk a mile down the street to her neighbor's house when she needs water. Then, somehow, despite her frailty, she has to lug a five-gallon jug back home.

Flossie Ford-Hedrington stands beside her well, which stopped producing water last year. (Sasha Abramsky)

Ailing and prematurely aged, Ford-Hedrington looks as though she would struggle to lift a drinking bottle, let alone a full five-gallon container. Still, she does it. “I say— *God* say—yes, I could,” she announces fiercely. And then she huffs and puffs theatrically, flexing her wasting arm muscles to illustrate her daily struggle with the water jug. “I got to walk,” she adds. “My car’s broke.” She holds the jug first with her left arm, then with her right. And she shuffles—ever so slowly. “I keep on going. stop and I rest.” The odyssey takes her more than half an hour each way. If she has clothes to wash, she also has to drag a heavy laundry bag to her neighbors’ at the same time.

“Every year,” says professor Jay Lund of the University of California at Davis’s Center for Watershed Sciences, “California has a worse drought than most of the United States has ever seen. Look at how dry it is from April to October. If you had a drought like this in the East, it’s unimaginable.” And that’s not in a bad year, mind you, but in a typical, nothing-to-write-home-about year.

In a normal year, California gets most of its freshwater supplies from a handful of big storms in the fall and winter—storms that fill the lowland reservoirs and, more important, dump large amounts of snow on the majestic Sierra Nevada mountain range, where the water waits, frozen, until it is slowly released during the melting season. Those few, precious storms generate enough water to allow California’s tens of millions of residents to drink water as they please, to take showers and flush toilets, to wash cars, water lawns, and fill swimming pools. They allow oil firms to frack, golf courses to remain verdant, and farmers to grow crops. They allow, in short, the miracle of a hydrologic civilization, perched between desert and ocean, to flourish—and to do so with utter abandon.

Every California resident uses between 150 and 200 gallons of water per day, Lund estimates. That is roughly five times what residents in sun-parched Israel use; it is far more, too, than what Australians, Spaniards, or residents of other hot, dry, sunny countries consume. Californians live on land a few failed storms away from desiccation, but historically they’ve consumed water as if they lived in Vermont or New York or any other saturated East Coast state.

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But these past four years have been far from normal for Californians, as the big rain-and-snow dumps have failed to come through. And while the last seven months did bring considerable rain to much of the northern parts of the state, it hasn’t been enough to compensate for the fact that the vital accumulations of snow high up in the Sierras failed to materialize, or to replenish groundwater systems sucked dry by the arid years. When Governor Jerry Brown visited the mountainous high country in the early spring, just before announcing mandatory 25 percent water-conservation measures for nonagricultural uses, the snowpack was at a dismal 6 percent of where it would normally be at that time of year.

By then, 52 of California’s 58 counties were experiencing extreme drought conditions (the number has since climbed to 54). And despite the broader economy’s recovery from the 2008 collapse, some two dozen rural counties saw significant increases in joblessness, as agricultural workers and the employees of other local businesses reliant on regular water supplies, from carpet cleaners to car detailers, were laid off because of the lack of water.

The figures are worrying. California agriculture, worth more than \$40 billion in a good year, contracted by roughly \$1.5 billion last year, as farmers plowed up crops they could no longer water and focused their efforts on preserving their most profitable harvests. Yet it was the farmhands who planted and picked the crops, trimmed the trees, and packaged fruit who suffered most. In a July 2014 report, researchers from UC Davis estimated that 17,000 seasonal and part-time jobs would be lost that year in California due to the drought. And 2015 promises to be at least as bad.

In Kern County alone, at the southern end of the Central Valley, the Bakersfield food bank has been distributing drought-relief nutrition to hungry residents in 12 communities. Between May 2014 and March 2015, according to Ken White, the group’s executive director, his team gave out more than 125,000 boxes of food.

On the days that the food bank’s truck is scheduled to arrive in the impoverished town of Arvin, hungry farm laborers and their families—most speaking Spanish, some the indigenous languages of Oaxaca and other southern Mexican states—line up for hours at a small VFW post. I visited during a rainstorm, a rare break in the drought. But despite the heavy rain, hundreds of men, women, and children were lined up, waiting for their food. It was a dismal scene, like a Dorothea Lange photograph come to life



A worker walks through farm fields in Los Banos. (Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

Before this happened, says Roberto Ricardez, 35, standing in line in his blue jeans and tan work boots, there were weeks when he could work up to 65 hours, picking cherries and making good money. Now he's down to about 40 hours a week and earning minimum wage. "Before, I'd take my daughters out to eat. Now I can only buy them the necessities," he explains. Ricardez and most of his neighbors come to the food pantry each month. Those meager boxes of pasta, canned vegetables, and overripe peaches are all that stand between them and hunger.

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Over the months ahead, California's water districts will have to come up with extraordinary ways to make residents conserve anywhere from 8 to 36 percent of the amount of

water they used in 2013, for a cumulative nonagricultural-water saving of 25 percent. For consumers in wealthy cities, this means a set of inconveniences: strict limits on when lawns can be watered, and for how long; cars buffed to a shiny perfection less often; toilets flushed according to the rules of that corny old jingle, "If it's yellow, let it mellow; if it's brown, flush it down." It means the introduction of water meters in cities where residents have long enjoyed cheap, one-size-fits-all rate plans. And it means that some people who flout the rules by overusing water will have irate neighbors inform on them and be forced to pay fines.

Yet for most cities, the drought doesn't mean calamity; the great majority of California's urban hubs have the resources to buy water from elsewhere, and many have already stockpiled sufficient supplies to see them through several more years of drought. "Urban areas were very well prepared," explains Professor Lund. "After the 1988–92 drought, they invested a lot of money getting ready for the next drought."

For less wealthy communities, however, the inconveniences quickly turn into catastrophes. In hundreds of poor rural spots—places too small to qualify as towns, too isolated to be incorporated into larger cities, and oftentimes condemned as "nonviable" by their county's General Plan—the drought has literally meant the end of water. These settlements have long been at the mercy of ramshackle delivery systems, which pump unsafe water laced with arsenic, uranium, nitrates, and pesticides into family homes; now those wells are dry, too. And despite the passage of the state's largely aspirational Human Right to Water Act in 2012, the large-scale investments needed to link these communities into the water systems of bigger towns, or to dig wells deep enough to allow them to survive off their own water supplies, haven't materialized.

In East Porterville, where the entire city has run dry, hundreds of families now rely on trucked-in water. Journalists have poured into town in recent months, lured by the headline of a city without water. But East Porterville is, in fact, only the tip of the iceberg. Smaller, more invisible settlements throughout the great farming valleys of California are in crisis—many from a lack of water, but also from a loss of jobs.

**Golden state no more:** In May, 2015, extreme drought spread like a bruise across California.



- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

In Orange Center, on the southern outskirts of Fresno, the lack of water simply highlights all of the other social inequities that afflict these small satellite communities. Many of the houses are in terrible condition, their lots filled with rusting shells of old cars and electrical appliances. Some of the streets are known to be dangerous, the domain of people involved in illicit economic activity who would rather remain as far off the grid as possible. Others have residents who have long avoided involvement with the city, fearing that they would end up being burdened with utility bills they'd have no way of paying, but who now are desperate for the city's water pipes to snake out to their parched lots.

"We just woke up, and there was no water," says Caroline Rosiles, 53, who lives with her husband, one of their sons, two of their grandchildren, a niece, a parrot, and several dogs in a tiny house on an unpaved road a quarter-mile south of the city. Last year, her well—dug only to about 90 feet—ran dry. Now she spends hundreds of dollars a month buying nonpotable water that she stores in a 2,500-gallon tank, and roughly \$100 a month more doing her family's laundry in a city laundromat. For drinking water, she relies on donations from an organization called Self Help Enterprises, which works to bring safe supplies to impoverished communities throughout the region.

Rosiles resents the persimmon farmer who recently moved in next door, dug deep wells that sucked up the remaining groundwater, and then told her that she and her family should find somewhere else to live. He wants her land, she suspects, wants to dig wells deeper than the

ones she can afford, and—drought be damned—plant more crops. She doesn't resent farmers in general; they make the land beautiful, she says, especially when the peach trees near her home start blossoming pink in spring. But she does bemoan the lack of limits on their water use—the implicit notion that those with the deepest pockets have the right to outrill their neighbors and monopolize the increasingly scarce resource.

"He tells us we should move out of here, because he wants to put in more trees," Rosiles says. "I tell him he can shove it up his ass. This is my home." And yet she fears that her family is living on borrowed time. Two of her children moved away. She suspects that her grandchildren will want out, too, when they grow up. The land is failing: In addition to drying up wells, the drought has also caused the land to sink, as groundwater levels fall and salination of the remaining water increases. Now the economies in many of these agricultural regions are crumbling, as jobs in industries tied to high water usage evaporate.

"It's really exacerbating a lot of the fundamental problems we have in water management and water access in California," says Laurel Firestone, co-executive director of the Visalia-based Community Water Center.

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The state knows it has a problem. In 2014, the Brown administration released an ambitious Water Action Plan, specifying the need for significant public investment in infrastructure. Later that same year, voters backed up this call to action by passing a \$7.5 billion water bond. Along the way, the state's Water Resources Control Board, part of the California Environmental Protection Agency, commissioned studies examining ways to get safe water into these communities. The board has also released several million dollars in emergency infrastructure funding.

These measures have helped in some communities. When the dried-up wells in Cameron Creek started collapsing, Self Help Enterprises convinced the nearby town of Farmersville to apply for grant money from the state and the US Department of Agriculture to extend its water-supply system there. The organization then worked to expedite the environmental-approval process and the project's implementation, and it even helped residents pay to hook up their houses to the new water pipes.

For showers, they heat a little water on the stove, put it into a bucket, and dump it over their heads.

Earlier this spring, to the joy of locals like Rick Overby, 53, who lives with his wife in a blue mobile home, water once again began to flow from the taps. "Other than my God, there's nothing more important than water," says Overby. "Gold? You can't drink gold."

But for many other places, the investments have yet to materialize, and time is running out. Even with the lobbying efforts of Self Help Enterprises, as well as several million dollars in funding, the soonest that a place like Orange Center can be linked to Fresno's water system is in the summer of 2016, with some estimates putting that date farther off, to 2017. And even then, not all Orange Center households will be linked to the water supply.

Meanwhile, as thousands of California's poorest residents struggle to survive without water, agribusiness has been rushing to grab what water supplies remain. Throughout the drought, the acreage devoted to water-intensive crops such as almonds has soared. By the end of 2014, according to National Agricultural Statistics Services data, the land used for almond production stood at a little over 1 million acres—an increase of about 200,000 acres since 2008. During the worst drought in California's recorded history, in other words, the amount of land devoted to one of the state's most water-intensive crops went up almost 25 percent. The numbers are similar for other water-intensive but profitable crops.

For small family farms, like the 120-acre plot in Fairmead run by Elaine Moore and her husband, almonds represent relatively easy money. Over the past 50 years, Moore, 67, has planted everything from sweet potatoes to cotton, alfalfa to raisin grapes. For her, small farming is the "mystic side of life," especially the extraordinary beauty of trees bursting with blossoms in the spring and dripping with gorgeously colored leaves in the fall. When the floor fell out of the price of raisins a few years back, Moore recalls, "it just about broke our backs. We decided to do almonds. It's our eighth year in almonds—a lot less work."

Yet over the last four years, one well after another on the Moores' small plot has run dry. A well they recently had drilled to nearly 600 feet, at a cost of over \$20,000, is still pumping water, but she doesn't know for how long.

Meanwhile, huge almond concerns are buying up vast tracts of land, sinking ever-deeper wells at ever-higher costs, and sucking up the reachable water supplies. In Monson, a 41-home settlement in Tulare County, locals talk of a large agribusiness concern near their dry hamlet that has drilled a well, at enormous expense, down to a level of 1,500 feet. There are rumors that some other new wells probe down half a mile.

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In his classic 1996 book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, the Indian journalist P. Sainath wrote that droughts tend to be suffered by the poor "when available water resources are colonised by the powerful." Earlier struggles over water pitted

villages, castes, and classes against one another, led to vast internal migrations, and frequently cost the poor the little plots of land that they had farmed for generations. It was, Sainath wrote, an “invisible agony.”

Today, in California—the richest state in the richest country on Earth—thousands of forgotten residents have to forage for water in ways not that dissimilar to those of the impoverished Indian peasants depicted in Sainath’s book. Many of the agricultural workers who harvest highly profitable, water-intensive crops such as almonds return home after work to houses with no running water, no safe drinking water, and not even a drop that they can use to irrigate their own vegetable gardens.

I spoke to a young woman, Maria, in Fairmead, who can’t give her newborn a daily bath; instead, she tries to keep the infant clean with baby wipes. She lives with her parents, José and Puresa, who shower only twice a week and collect the runoff to use on their fruit trees. The family eats from paper plates because they can no longer wash their dishes. With eight people in the house, they limit their use of the toilet to at most eight flushes per day.

In Monson, I encountered Laura Garcia, who lives with her husband and their four children. With no functional well on her rental property, her landlord has installed a big blue porta-potty near the kids’ basketball hoop in the yard. Inside the house, the flush toilet sits, unusable. For drinking water, they rely on the dozens of bottles brought by the county; for showers, they heat a little water on the stove, put it into a bucket, and dump it over their heads.

In Fairmead, I met a widowed retiree, Lois Lee Davidson, who lives on a small plot of land sandwiched between the railway lines and the freeway. She has resided there for over 30 years, the last 10 of them by herself. When Davidson’s well went bone-dry, she rented space—at the rate of \$600 per month—in a nearby trailer park just so she could take morning showers (she has since given up that space due to the cost). Scared of using up her water to wash dishes, Davidson had, by the spring of 2015, stopped cooking and instead started heating up store-bought meals in a microwave. Each pot of coffee she made had to last her two days.

“I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d be without water,” Davidson says in wonder. “We used to have the best water in the county.”

This is California in the year 2015. This is the fate of tens of thousands of people who have been left to scrounge for water in a land of lush orchards, rolling golf courses, and enormous swimming pools. And it could be the fate of millions of other Americans if the country doesn’t confront the bleak reality of what happens when we consume a vital—and increasingly scarce—resource with utter abandon.

Successfully grappling with America’s ever-growing need for water will require a Herculean effort—a mix of vision, determination, and, above all, action. How can we preserve plentiful water supplies for ordinary people in the face of soaring demands for water by agribusiness, the oil industry, and other core parts of the economy? How can we protect freshwater supplies in an era of climate change, weather extremes, and rising sea levels? How do we ensure that arid parts of the country—states such as Texas and California, which have seen their populations soar over the past half century—can continue to meet the needs of everyday life?

We have confronted such ecological and infrastructure challenges before, repairing the devastated High Plains of the Dust Bowl era and providing rural electrification programs in the 1930s through the Tennessee Valley Authority, to name just two examples. With a comparable political will, we can—and must—tackle the growing water challenges of this century, ensuring that the residents of modest little towns like Fairmead and Monson have adequate access to our most basic and vital resource.

This country has heating-assistance programs to help people who cannot otherwise pay their heating bills; we have food stamps to put meals on the table of those who might otherwise go hungry. But we have no national plans in place to give water-purchasing grants to the poor in parched regions of the country. Nor do we have any easy-to-access, state-funded programs whereby individuals like Flossie Ford-Hedrington or Caroline Rosiles can obtain grants or zero-interest loans to make it possible for them to drill deep wells on their land. These are all partial fixes that would be affordable and immediate in their impact, and they would make existing, but small-bore, federal and state programs more effective. The US Department of Agriculture, for instance, does provide Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants, which, in conjunction with state-sponsored emergency grants, fund roughly 20 projects in California. But the department caps its grants at \$500,000 per project—far shy of what many small communities need to beef up their water infrastructure. And while California recently moved toward mandating that water districts come up with long-term sustainability plans, these limits—once proposed—won’t kick in for decades. In the meantime, there are no restrictions on how much water big agricultural combines can monopolize during a drought.

For the state’s forgotten inhabitants, like Irma Rodriguez, 43, a nurse who lives with her husband and six children in Orange Center, the options are limited. Since her own well ran dry, Rodriguez drives to and from her mother’s house each day to collect water, making sure it’s correctly divided into separate pots for flushing toilets, cooking, drinking, and

showers. The circuit takes up to three hours, she estimates, but what other choice does she have? "People who live here don't have the money to put in a down payment and move to an apartment or home downtown. This is their lives; their friends are here."

Rodriguez pauses, pondering her predicament. "We need water to live, to survive," she says. "You can't just ignore these rural communities."