

How the Drought Is Impacting California's Black Families

The persistent drought is threatening communities that have existed for nearly a century.

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California is enduring a severe drought.

(Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

May 11, 2015 By [Amy Alexander](#)



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Every day, like a trusted analog clock, Robert Williams sticks to his routine. Not blistering summer heat, blinding dust storms, nor biting winter cold can keep Williams, 80, from tending the land his father bought during the 1940s in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley.

For the past few years, however, it has been particularly challenging for Williams to maintain his routine. Like other black and working-class residents of Fairmead, a tiny unincorporated community in Madera County, California, just north of Fresno, Williams has experienced grinding hardship caused by the [drought](#) that's lingered for nearly half a decade.

The alfalfa and cotton that once provided a solid income for Williams' family is barely surviving on the drip-irrigation system he developed. The water supply in Williams' private well is nearly depleted. Most family-owned wells like his only go several hundred feet deep. But those that serve the massive, corporate-owned [pistachio and almond farms](#) can reach 1,000 feet. To make matters worse, the corporate-farm wells often suck up more of the dwindling water table than the shallower wells.

This has led to a cycle of escalating costs that most families cannot meet. It has created a seemingly endless era of frustration for the Williams family and other working-class families who have lived in Fairmead for decades. They are the descendants of people who arrived here from the Deep South in the 1940s, seeking the bounty of affordable land and prosperity that California then promised. Now, after decades spent building small businesses and raising families, they face a bleak prospect: The persistent drought is threatening their livelihoods and identities.

"I'm not sure how he does it," says Thelma Williams, Robert's 44 year-old daughter. "But he stays on his schedule—he goes out, gets on that tractor of his, and will just turn the hay and soil over and over. It's dry, dry, dry, but he isn't about to stop."

-The biggest difference between the Williams family farm and the industrial farms is not just that small-scale farmers have only recently lacked the financial wherewithal to dig deep wells. Black farmers in Fairmead and surrounding counties have faced disenfranchisement virtually since they first arrived in this part of California during the early 20th century.

"Blacks who migrated to Fairmead and other parts of the Valley from the Deep South were restricted by racially discriminatory local laws and rules called covenants from buying land or property in towns that had services and features like schools, reliable sewers, roads, and so on," said Michael Eissinger, a doctoral student at the University of California, Merced, and an authority on the Central Valley's black history.

In short, black people like the Williams family who lived across California's arid, agricultural midsection were prevented by racial discrimination from gaining capital and connectivity until at least the 1960s, when state and federal laws prohibited such forms of discrimination. White people in nearby communities had access to bank loans, social networks, and other resources to sustain them during droughts or economic downturns. Black residents of Fairmead and other valley towns did not have those options. Today, blacks and Latinos comprise the majority of Fairmead's roughly 1,500 residents. Most of the elderly residents are white. Nearly 34 percent of the city's residents live near the poverty level.

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---The past two years have been hard. In August 2014, when the water table that served most households and small farmers in Fairmead dried up, the Madera County Farm Bureau donated, and began delivering, emergency drinking water—weekly drops of more than 340 cases of 16-ounce bottles for more than 40 private well owners.

But by last November, the Madera County Farm Bureau's bottled water donations ran out. So the county's environmental health authorities supplied water. By February of this year, its funding for water was diminished. Since then, authorities have secured emergency funding via the California Disaster Assistance Act. They are developing other emergency tactics: providing drinking water to individuals and supplying bulk water storage tanks with non-potable water that can be hauled to private well owners.

The cost to dig deep wells can be prohibitively expensive—and anyway, state water experts estimate that the groundwater table in this part of the San Joaquin Valley [is disappearing](#).

Fairmead in 2011 received a 212,000-gallon community water tank through a million-dollar [Community Development Block Grant](#) funded by the state and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It was the first significant upgrade to the community's water infrastructure since the area was settled in the early 1900s, when [speculators from Northern California](#) first bought up the land in this region.

Many in the Fairmead community—like the Williams family—with property far away from the big community water tanks have been hit hard by the double whammy of the disappearing well water and large corporate farms that can afford to siphon out what little underground water remains.

“We don't necessarily blame the big farmers—they're working the land just like most of us,” said Vickie Ortiz, secretary of Fairmead Community and Friends, a local advocacy group that includes the Williams family and other black, Latino, and white working-class citizens. “But it's also true that most of us, like the Williams, we don't have the same level of resources to be able to withstand these conditions for too long.”
