

# A Tiny California Town Prepares for 'Armageddon'

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FIREBAUGH — Shawn Coburn is barreling down a country road in his white Ford F-150 pickup, talking about how California's water crisis darkly reminds him of a scene from a movie aptly named "Armageddon."

**Image:** video grab of Firebaugh drought

"Billy Bob Thornton tells Bruce Willis that a huge asteroid is approaching Earth," says Coburn, 40. "Willis asks Thornton who will get hurt, and Thornton tells him that he just doesn't get it — that everyone will be dead, that the game is over."



The disaster coming this spring and summer is no movie, and nothing menacing is falling from the sky. It's about what's not falling from the sky — rain. After three years of below-average rain and snowfall, coupled with new pumping restrictions to protect endangered fish, California's farmers are running out of water. The devastating impact has trickled down to dozens of small Central Valley farming communities.

This is the story about one of those towns:

Firebaugh.

It's also about Armando Ramirez, a 63-year-old barbershop owner on Firebaugh's main street who says business is down 90% from last year. It's about Manuel Rivera, 20, who is hoping against hope that he can keep the lights on at his clothing and jewelry store across the street.

And it's about Randy, Frank, Steve and Larry Gonzales, four friendly brothers who say their family's half-century-old auto-parts and repair business around the corner is withering because farmworkers are driving less and getting laid off in droves.

The farmers who will be slammed the hardest are those who depend on the Central Valley Project, the massive federal system of dams, reservoirs, pumps and canals that helped spawn California's \$36 billion farming industry — the state's largest.

### **MANY TOWNS WORRIED**

Within a couple of years, Coburn says, numerous small towns like Firebaugh could die and hundreds of thousands of once-profitable acres could turn into fields of dust. Beginning today, the federal water spigot in California has been turned off for the first time. And just as in "Armageddon," the game might be over.

Across the Central Valley, warns a new University of California-Davis study, 80,000 jobs could be lost this year.

In Firebaugh, a historic town of 7,000, one of the first casualties could be the Silver Creek Almond Co., which Coburn co-founded five years ago to pack and market the almonds he grows on 1,500 acres.

All of the water used to nourish Coburn's orchards comes from the Central Valley Project. And on Feb. 20, federal water officials announced a "zero allocation" to farmers — most likely for the rest of the year. Farmers who depend on water from the State Water Project are only slightly luckier — they have been told their allocation will be 15% of normal.

"In a few years this will all be gone," Coburn predicted as he walked through a cavernous warehouse stacked with bins containing 10 million pounds of almonds, about 70% of which will be sent overseas.

"Think of the business that will be lost at the Port of Oakland," Coburn said. "This is all going toward reducing our trade deficit."

### **BUSINESS WAY DOWN**

Back on O Street, the main drag of downtown Firebaugh, is shrouded in sadness.

Ramirez, the barber, says he understands why many of his longtime customers

can no longer afford even a \$10 haircut. Rivera, who owns the clothing and jewelry store Xavier & Sariah Styles with his mom, says his business is down the same as Ramirez's — 90% from a year ago.

"We're now ringing up only \$50 in sales a day," Rivera said.

The rough times for Firebaugh started in August 2007 when U.S. District Court Judge Oliver Wanger reduced the amount of water pumped from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to protect the delta smelt, a tiny fish, from extinction.

The new restrictions decreased farming on the west side of the Central Valley, which is much more dependent on federal water than the east side.

The water nightmare caused by the pumping restrictions and dry weather has hit Main Street at a time when the recession and housing foreclosure crisis already are pummeling valley towns.

In the past year, a third of Firebaugh's downtown businesses have closed. They include an ice cream shop, a Western clothing store and a once-popular Mexican restaurant. Even the lone bar catering to farm laborers was shuttered.

Firebaugh, settled during the Gold Rush as a major ferry crossing for prospectors heading up the San Joaquin River, is now about 90% Latino.

The city's official jobless rate is 23%. But Jose Ramirez, Firebaugh's city manager, estimates it's probably closer to 35% because so many undocumented workers don't make it into the official statistics. In the past year, sales tax revenue has plunged more than 40%.

And the nightmare is just beginning.

## **WELLS NO SOLUTION**

The huge Westlands Water District, wholly dependent on federal water, predicts up to 400,000 acres of its 611,000 acres of farmland will lie fallow this year. Farmers such as Coburn are spending millions of dollars desperately digging wells. But the water underground contains so much salt and boron it will kill orchards and vineyards in two or three years.

"Putting our well water on almond trees is like giving them chemotherapy," Coburn said. "It will fry them."

Back in town, Steve Malanca, general manager of the John Deere dealership, gazes at a former alfalfa field across the street.

Malanca doesn't just see bare dirt. He conjures up the image of the tractor and the 30-foot-wide disk needed to prepare the field to grow alfalfa. He sees all the irrigation and seeding equipment — and crews — needed to get the alfalfa seeds in the ground; the companies needed to make the fertilizers and insecticides to ensure that the seeds germinate; the experts with advanced degrees needed to inspect the fields and help farmers design their battle plans against pests and disease.

He sees four other pieces of equipment — a swather, hay rake, baler and harrow bed — that are needed before a semitrailer with a forklift loads the hay for delivery to a dairy.

"Without water," Malanca said, "none of that will happen."

The stress and depression that often accompany layoffs are taking their toll.

Firebaugh Police Chief Elsa Lopez has noticed a recent uptick in domestic violence calls. And the number of people arrested on drunken-driving charges in January was double what it was a year ago.

With sales tax revenue tanking, the city is asking its employees to take one furlough day a month to try to head off layoffs. But Lopez resisted calls for furloughs for her 12 sworn officers, fearing that layoffs on the farms will increase drug use, which in turn will lead to more burglaries and robberies. In lieu of the furloughs, Ramirez is asking that the cops not be paid for any holidays.

## **MANY SUFFER DEPRESSION**

If things in Firebaugh weren't difficult enough, Premier Paso, the town's lone substance-abuse center, closed in September because state legislators were late passing a budget.

"Losing them was a sad day for us," Lopez said.

Dr. Marcia Sablan and her husband, Dr. Oscar Sablan, who for the past 27 years have run a Firebaugh medical clinic, say they are treating many more farm employees for depression.

On Wednesday, Maria Linares, 38, brought her 17-year-old son to the clinic because he was sick. While she was there, she spoke to "Dr. Marcia," who also happens to be the town's mayor, about the anxiety at home.

Linares' husband, an irrigation supervisor at an almond ranch in Firebaugh, is losing self-esteem, she said. He is now working only one or two days a week

and fears he'll lose his job. And her job is also at risk: She works on the almond processing line at Coburn's Silver Creek Almond Co.

If her husband does lose his job, Linares said, they will probably be forced to leave the trailer they paid \$35,000 for three years ago so they could live on the almond ranch.

Once upon a time they looked forward to moving from the trailer into a house in the heart of town.

"But that dream," she said, "has all been erased because we have no water."

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