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Empty Fields Fill Urban Basins and Farmers' Pockets

By FELICITY BARRINGER

BRAWLEY, Calif. — Three generations of Al Kalin's family have worked their 2,000 acres of carrots and sugar beets, wheat and alfalfa for almost a century in the Imperial Valley, a scorching swath of Southern California desert that was unfit for farming until water from the [Colorado River was diverted here](#) in 1901.

But now Mr. Kalin and his brother enjoy a choice that their parents and grandparents never had. They can continue to farm all their land, or they can stop farming some of it and earn more than \$500 an acre — more than the market value of a crop like alfalfa in a given year — simply by not using the water required to nourish those crops. Water saved is sent on to thirsty cities and suburbs to the west: San Diego, Los Angeles and Palm Springs.

With water increasingly scarce in the West, some other communities are allowing farmers to sell their allotment of it for whatever price they can find, in some cases thousands of dollars for the amount it takes to grow an acre of a crop. But this comes with a hitch. Working farms provide jobs and income to their many suppliers. There are 450 farmers in the Imperial Valley, but half the jobs held by the 174,000 residents are tied to agriculture.

When land is idled, the communities around the farms can wither. Residents here point to the neighboring Palo Verde Valley, where farmers can sell more than a quarter of their water supply at much higher prices in a process they control. As a result, nearly a third of the agricultural land was not farmed this year; over time, businesses and workers have suffered.

Imperial's fear is that a century after Colorado River water allowed this land to be a cornucopia, unfettered urban water transfers could turn it back into a desert. So the deal that Imperial water managers struck limits how much water can be sold and for what price, and it controls how much acreage is enrolled in the program and for how long.

Many farmers, including the Kalins, have resisted the temptation to sell. "There is something about that fallowing, it just doesn't sit well with my brother and I," Mr. Kalin said.

The **Imperial Irrigation District**, where they farm, controls more water than any other place in the West — about 20 percent of the annual flow of the Colorado. “It’s built into the DNA here that water is a birthright,” said Kevin Kelley, the irrigation district’s general manager.

The chance to profit from water sales is an unsettling phenomenon here. Even though less than 5 percent of Imperial County’s 500,000 acres of agricultural land has ever been idle at any given time, many residents believe that unrestrained water sales would unravel the fabric of the community.

Water sales began here in 2003, when, under pressure from the Department of the Interior, the ultimate authority over Colorado River flow, the irrigation district’s board agreed to export 10 percent of its usual allotment, or just under 100 billion gallons, to cities over nearby dry mountains. Farmers had been accused of using water inefficiently, and the board feared being forced to forfeit water. The water sale was the largest recorded in the West.

To avoid an aquatic gold rush, rules were set. Farmers work through their water district and cannot negotiate directly with urban districts. Fields proposed for the program are selected randomly and can go out of production for only two years at a time.

Some Imperial Valley farmers objected to the restrictions and sued in state court, seeking direct control of their water. That suit is pending. These farmers know that the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which is called Met and serves 17 million people, is paying Palo Verde Valley farmers seven times as much for water than what Imperial farmers receive from their irrigation district. The board of the district in Imperial opposes any more water deals. But many worry that the cities will get their way eventually.

“If we ship any more water out, we’ve compromised our future,” said Gary Wyatt, an Imperial County supervisor.

Mr. Kalin said: “There was nothing here before the water was here. There will be nothing here after it’s gone.”

The program to idle land started as an organized way to export the 10 percent. The water’s price ranges from more than \$200 to more than \$500 per fallowed acre, though irrigating that same acre costs farmers far less. The district has not let the price go up, even as farmers see much higher prices paid elsewhere. The program is expected to end in 2017, when the cities’ needs can all be met through conservation.

Stella Mendoza, the board’s president, rules out selling more water but acknowledges the omnipresent pressure. “There’s no peace on the river,” she said. “Met is still after us.”

Farmers in Palo Verde, who deal more directly with Met, receive a one-time payment of \$3,170 to enroll an acre in the program and about \$600 each year it is left fallow. There, too, farmers hoped a deal would inoculate them from pressure to transfer even more water.

In the [Palo Verde Irrigation District](#), farmers have the final say about their water's fate. In Imperial, the board of the irrigation district, elected by the whole community, has control.

"The problem with the Palo Verde deal is that it ignores all of the interests of everyone else in the community," said [Robert Glennon](#), a law professor at the University of Arizona. " 'It's my water, my money, and I don't give a darn about anyone else.' "

Palo Verde officials counter that their deal with Met included \$6 million for a fund to create jobs; the fund's director said it had filled about 60 by spending money to train truck drivers and invest in small businesses. As water flowed to the cities, things changed in Palo Verde. Wheat and alfalfa were cut back. An agricultural equipment dealership owned by Waymen and Carolyn Dekens closed in 2009; Mrs. Dekens blamed both water sales and the recession.

"Agriculture kept our business going," she said.

Another equipment supplier, Mike Hudson, said the program had helped him by preventing small-farmer bankruptcies.

Environmentalists say the Imperial water transfer has harmed the [fast-shrinking Salton Sea](#), a briny lake that sits below sea level. Water irrigating farm fields drains into the Salton Sea; water sent to cities does not. Promises were made, but no money was set aside to mitigate the air pollution from the dust blowing from the widening shore.

This problem is one reason Imperial County's supervisors and others filed their own state lawsuit to undo the deal. They won the first round; the appeal will be argued next month.

Ralph Strahm, 54, a third-generation farmer, is one of 100 Imperial farmers to enroll in the program, signing up several parcels among his 4,000 acres. It works well for his business. "It gave the land time to rest and gave us time to do improvements," Mr. Strahm said.

When crop prices are high, as they are now, he leans against leaving his land idle. He always grows winter vegetables like carrots and lettuce, which fetch the highest prices. But when the price for water-intensive alfalfa drops, he does the math. If he would earn, at best, \$75 more per acre than if he left the land fallow, he decides that the risk and work are not worth the return and offers to leave it idle.

At most, only 18,000 of Imperial's 500,000 agricultural acres are in the program at the same time.

Mr. Strahm said he sensed his neighbors' disapproval. "There's been some standoffishness," he said. But he would not hesitate to enter the lottery again.

One of the reasons some environmental groups favor an active and open market in water is that higher prices give farmers an incentive to conserve. Economists believe that markets will help fix the uneven distribution of water around the West and may prompt a rethinking of the whole system.

An expanding geothermal industry in Imperial needs more water. And there are new uses for land: solar-power businesses file proposals almost weekly. Mr. Kelley, the district's general manager, said that if the economy diversified, he could envision a future when water sales would be more palatable.

Mr. Kalin knows that eventually crop prices will fall and that it will look more appealing to leave land fallow. "When times are bad or the banker is knocking on your door," he said, "everything's different."

But for now, the Kalins choose farming.