

## **The Fight for Family Farms: Farm Worker Success in the Westlands, 1960-1986**

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### **Introduction: A Bright Future Foiled**

Prior to the gold rush in 1848, California had been scarcely populated. Without proper irrigation technologies, California's land is only useful for dry farming, which is not the most lucrative type of agriculture. In an effort to populate the Spanish frontier, the Spanish government issued land grants for California lands to its citizens, a policy the Mexican Republic later followed. These land grants were often for huge amounts of land, well over the ideal family farm size, with some of them reaching 100,000 acres. Shortly after the Mexican-American War, Mexican landowners had their lands stripped away by the American government, who favored Anglo settlers. However, without proper irrigation technologies, neither of these groups of landowners were able to maximize their wealth.

Large landowners<sup>2</sup> fortunes changed in 1902 when the US Congress passed the Reclamation Act. The act's primary purpose was to "settle people on the [Western] land and protect them [settlers] from speculators."<sup>3</sup> While controversial with large landowners who chafed against the act's acreage limit and residency requirements, the Reclamation Act stands as the first step the US took to transform its Western lands into fertile farmland. The acre limit barred farms greater than 160-acres from receiving irrigation water, while the residency requirement aimed to eliminate absentee landowners and speculators by requiring all farm owners to live on their land. At the same time, excess lands had to be sold at prices that

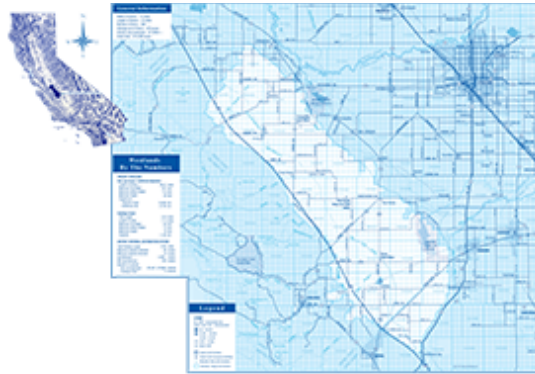
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<sup>1</sup> The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology, I use agribusiness, excess landowners, and excess landholders interchangeably. While the technical term for farming operations over 160 acres is either excess landowners or excess landholders, for the most part they tend to be massive farming corporations. As a result, I utilize the term agribusiness accordingly. However, not all operations over 160 acres were owned by farming corporations. At times, these huge chunks of land were owned by speculators. For those instances, I specify speculators and avoid using agribusiness to describe them.

<sup>3</sup> James J. O'Brien to George Ballis, April 1, 1976, 3.

reflected pre-irrigation values. These requirements were upheld by the Supreme Court in 1958 because “the limitation insures that the enormous expenditures will not go in disproportionate share to a few individuals.”<sup>4</sup> These requirements made the Reclamation Act a nightmare for landholders in the West because it essentially forced landholders to redistribute their massive ranches for the public’s benefit.



**Image 1:** Map of the Westlands Water District. Located in the western portion of Fresno County and roughly the size of Rhode Island.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the Reclamation Act’s adoption in 1902, the Federal government did not begin irrigating California until Congress passed the Central Valley Project in 1933. Even under the Central Valley Project, the west Fresno area, known as the Westlands Water District (WWD), received a sparse amount of irrigation water from the Federal government. The 160-acre limitation only applied to lands that received irrigation water from the Federal government, so as late as 1964, the Westlands had 70% of its land owned by excess landholders.<sup>6</sup> To address the problem of excess landholders in the Westlands, the San Luis unit’s distribution system, authorized as an extension of the Central Valley Project in 1960, was meant to irrigate the Westlands so family farms could prosper.<sup>7</sup> Under the San Luis unit, the Reclamation Act finally applied to the long-neglected Westlands. However, large

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<sup>4</sup> George L. Baker, “Pact Could Aid Big Land Sales,” in *Fresno Bee*, March 18, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> “Westlands Land Phasing Map,” 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Holum to James L. Vizzard, October 8, 1964, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart L. Udall to Lyndon Johnson, April 24, 1964.

landowners organized against the Reclamation Act, to prevent the act's enforcement in the Westlands and protect their control over the region's farms. Often financially well-off individuals or corporations, like the Southern Pacific Railroad, readily marshaled their wealth to amplify their grievances against the Reclamation Act. As a result, excess landowners changed interpretations of the Reclamation Act through strategic navigation of water bureaucracy for their benefit, making the Westlands during the 1970s the least compliant water district in land redistribution.<sup>8</sup> Boasting an incredible amount of wealth and influence, excess landowners acted as strong and vocal opponents to the Reclamation Act's enforcement.



**Image 2:** Walter Goldschmidt pioneered the claim of family farms producing a higher quality of life than corporate farms. His research was instrumental in shattering notions of agribusiness being the most effective producers of food and wealth.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, settlers of the West viewed the Reclamation Act as their ticket to modernity. According to Walter Goldschmidt's thesis of 1944, the Westlands was destined to

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<sup>8</sup> Neil W. Schild to James L. Draper, February 25, 1975, 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas S. Wesiner, James Loucky, Hilarie Kelly, and Martin Cohen, "In Memoriam," [https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/\\_files/inmemoriam/html/walterrochsgoldschmidt.html](https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/inmemoriam/html/walterrochsgoldschmidt.html).

become among the wealthiest regions in the world. Goldschmidt, comparing the quality of life conditions in the California cities of Arvin and Dinuba, argued that corporate farms produced a lower quality of life than family farms.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Reclamation Act was understood as a harbinger of rapid economic growth and the good life in rural regions through its development of family farms. In regards to the Westlands, the University of California (UC) system acknowledged it as among the most underdeveloped regions in California and determined irrigation to be the fastest way to develop the district.<sup>11</sup> The UC supported Goldschmidt's thesis, and felt irrigation in accordance with the Reclamation Act was a fail-safe method for making the Westlands prosper.

In 1968, the California government announced irrigation projects for the Westlands and followed this announcement four years later with plans for the I-5 freeway to pass through the Westlands.<sup>12</sup> The announcements of increased spending on the Westlands highlights California's attempt to expeditiously revitalize the Westlands, with both plans designed to strengthen the region's economy. As a result, corporations began investing in the Westlands. The promise of irrigation transforming the Westlands into the new Orange County of California even fooled the Walt Disney Company, who planned to build an amusement park in the region.<sup>13</sup> The increased federal spending, coupled with an increase in private spending, demonstrates that California intended to develop the Westlands into the most prosperous region in the US.

Unfortunately for the Westlands, full enforcement of the Reclamation Act never materialized. Landowners who far exceed the 160-acre limitation came to, and continue to, dominate the Westlands. Excess landholders banded together to successfully undermine the

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<sup>10</sup> Walter R. Goldschmidt, *As You Sow* (The Free Press, 1947), 423.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Fagin to Robert Harkness, October 25, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> "The Blossoming West of San Joaquin Valley," in *S.F. Examiner*, May 5, 1974.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

San Luis unit's goal of enforcing the Reclamation Act, but their efforts met resistance. Labor organizations increased their involvement in the San Luis unit through alternative methods. Labor organizations, like the AFL-CIO, mobilized more than ever to wage a tough battle against excess landholders. The mobilization of laborers materialized in lobbying Congress members, publicizing exploitable loopholes in irrigation contracts, and meeting with the US water bureaucracy. Utilized on two separate occasions, first in the 1960s as the San Luis unit was being negotiated and again in the 1970s as the San Luis unit was being built, these methods ultimately enjoyed limited success in preventing excess landowners from circumventing the Reclamation Act. Both times labor organizations triumphed over agribusiness, forcing excess landholders into compliance with the Reclamation Act by the late 1970s/early 1980s. The efforts undertaken by these labor organizations in the Westlands demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of organized labor in combating the interests of a small elite class.

Efforts against agribusiness in the Westlands did not have an experienced organization or leader. With César Chávez and his United Farm Workers (UFW) disinterested in fighting against agribusiness in the Westlands, the UFW's photographer, George Ballis, formed his own farm worker group, National Land for People (NLP).<sup>14</sup> The NLP aimed to capitalize on the promise made by the Reclamation Act to create family farms, in order to make farm workers the owners of the land they worked, summarized in their motto "Land belongs to those who work it."<sup>15</sup> Their task was difficult and ultimately resulted in failure, with President Ronald Reagan's administration passing the Reclamation Reform Act of 1982 (RRA), which

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<sup>14</sup> Although National Land for People was the most active and effective organization to seek enforcement of the Reclamation Act, they were not the only group to do so. To a lesser extent, organizations like the AFL-CIO, National Farmers' Union, the Catholic Church, and others participated in efforts to redistribute land in the Westlands. All of these groups shared the same goal of helping family farmers, and in my research, appeared to have mostly worked alongside the NLP. Thus, I use NLP and family farmer organizations interchangeably.

<sup>15</sup> Ildi Carlisle-Cummins, "Podcast 2: Can Land Belong to Those Who Work It?" (Cal Ag Roots, 2015), <https://www.agroots.org/nlp>.

repealed the family farm requirement for irrigation water recipients. As a result, the Westlands remains among the poorest regions in California. Additionally, many unincorporated communities in California suffer from the lack of clean affordable water, due to the RRA favoring the agricultural industry over farm workers in the distribution of water. However, the NLP did enjoy some success in enforcing the Reclamation Act prior to the RRA becoming law. Through active mobilization and exercising their legal rights, the NLP temporarily prevented agribusiness from avoiding compliance with the Reclamation Act.



**Image 3:** Cesar Chavez (left) and George Ballis (right) posing for a picture in front of an almond farm.<sup>16</sup>

Agribusiness today is a highly influential force that appears to be irreplaceable. The influence of agribusiness has been exercised repeatedly in history through the manipulation of laws, like extending the emergency Bracero Program long after the end of World War II, or

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<sup>16</sup> J. Kile, "George Ballis" (MoralHeroes, 2013), <http://moralheroes.org/george-ballis/>.

more recently in their ability to maintain the subsidy on corn.<sup>17</sup> This paper seeks to unravel the idea of agribusiness' invincibility by highlighting the successes of the NLP; thus demonstrating the effectiveness of social movements in dismantling the overwhelming influence of farm corporations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Wiebe E. Bijker's 2007 article, "Dikes and Dams, Thick with Politics" argues technology is able to further society by solving problems, but technology is unable to drastically change a society's values.<sup>18</sup> Thus, technology will produce more advanced societies but will amplify the values that society holds and in turn, the social structures that manifest from those values. This is true of the Westlands, where the social structure remained consistent, leaving farm worker income static even after irrigation transformed agriculture into a more lucrative industry than ever before. Thomas G. Andrews intervenes by claiming environmental technologies do not only reproduce oppressive social structures, but amplify the oppressive nature of these social structures. In strengthening the inequalities of social structures, environmental technologies fuel violent resistance to the social structures they reproduced.<sup>19</sup>

These fundamental texts detail the ways environmental technologies are able to reproduce social structures, marginalizing people according to race and class. However, these texts have placed a high value on the violent means of resistance, ignoring the non-violent efforts taken to dismantle a reproduced social structure in the West. Federal laws, like the Reclamation Act of 1902, attempted to prevent the reproduction of an Eastern social structure by preventing farms bigger than 160 acres from receiving irrigation water. The law

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<sup>17</sup> Ellis Hawley, "The Politics of the Mexican Labor Issue, 1950-1965" in *Agricultural History* 40, 3 (1966), 176.

<sup>18</sup> Wiebe E. Bijker, "Dikes and Dams, Thick with Politics" (*Isis* Volume 98, No. 1, 2007), 123.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 15.

legitimized the existence of marginalized communities and served as the backbone in a nonviolent resistance led by the NLP against the oppressive social structure brought by irrigation. Thus, I propose that nonviolent methods to dismantling oppressive social structures should be more closely examined, thereby intervening on current scholarly approaches hyper-focused on violence as the only means of resistance to an elite class that mobilizes technology to their advantage.

Research on disenfranchised communities has followed the trend of focusing on the “broken” aspects of those communities. Intending to highlight an often unseen problem for unfamiliar audiences, the hope is that a declension focus can bring forth change.<sup>20</sup> In the case of California’s Central Valley, this is as simple as detailing how economically behind the Valley is to the rest of California. However, this approach to research is highly problematic given the outcomes. Oftentimes, damage-centered research results in an exploitative relationship favoring the researcher over the disenfranchised community at the center of the research.<sup>21</sup> Damage-centered research incentivizes researchers to depict communities as broken by rewarding researchers’ careers for highlighting problems, as opposed to making an effort to improve those communities. This contributes to the distrust that disenfranchised communities have against researchers, making it increasingly difficult for future research into disenfranchised communities.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in depicting disenfranchised communities as “broken,” researchers effectively discard the historical reasons for why the communities are disenfranchised, which prevents certain solutions from being proposed to improve those marginalized communities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Education Review* 79.3 (Fall 2009), 409 & 411.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 411-412.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Education Review* 79.3 (Fall 2009), 415-416.

In an effort to break away from the trend of damage-based research, this paper will instead use desire-based research. Desire-based research, as described by Eve Tuck, attempts to understand the complexities and self-determination of disenfranchised communities.<sup>24</sup> Thus, this paper will not largely focus on why the Westlands continues to remain among the most impoverished regions of California. Instead, I will focus on the historical successes the people of the Westlands have had in bettering their lives. Although their efforts ended fruitlessly, their many accomplishments were no small feat. Today, the idea of redistributing land from agribusiness to farm workers to create multiple family farms has been reduced to an ideal because of the perception that agribusiness is far too profitable and influential for replacement. Yet the people of the Westlands nearly achieved this ideal less than forty years ago, meaning the dismantling of agribusiness in favor of family farms is attainable. Through a desire-based research framework, this paper will capitalize on those victories to emphasize the viability of creating a valley of family farms. The use of a desire-based research framework will also serve to recreate the valley's image from a helpless, disenfranchised community to a disenfranchised community capable of improving if given the proper amount of aid. Furthermore, the use of non-violent resistance demonstrates the desire for farm workers to improve their own situation.

### **1960s: The Beginning Battle Against Agribusiness**

Excess landholders stopped at nothing to undermine the Reclamation Act because it limited their ability to profit. The 160-acre limit prevented agribusiness from dominating Westlands' agriculture, but agribusiness was not the only victim of the Reclamation Act. Much of the land held in the Westlands was held primarily for speculation, as opposed to farming, evidenced by corporations like the Southern Pacific owning 106,000 acres in the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 416.

Westlands in 1976.<sup>25</sup> The Southern Pacific, a railroad corporation uninterested in farming, only sought to sell land at the best price as opposed to farming it. The Reclamation Act's anti-speculation clause prevented speculators like the Southern Pacific from selling off their lands for a hefty profit.<sup>26</sup> The two conditions, the 160-acre limit and anti-speculation clause, aimed to redistribute 70% of all land owned by excess landowners, but the wealth held by these excess landowners offered them the ability to retaliate against the law. For example, agribusiness used their wealth and influence to dominate all negotiations between the Westlands and the US government, primarily by crafting the by-laws of the Westlands' governing body to favor excess landholders. The elections created an illusion of democracy and fair play, but in fact were far from it. Voters receive more votes with the more land they own, so elections give significantly more influence to excess landholders over individuals residing in the Westlands.<sup>27</sup>

Not only were elections rigged to favor the excess landholders, but mechanisms were put in place to regulate who could run for office. Candidacy for the Westlands governing body was essentially limited to excess landholders. A key requirement for candidacy, being a landowner in the Westlands,<sup>28</sup> restricted city-dwellers and farm workers from office. Only excess landholders and family farmers remained eligible to run for office, an unlikely course for family farmers given another clause in the by-laws. The by-laws made positions for the governing body too costly for anyone, aside from the wealthy, to seriously consider, offering only a modest salary for all positions except for the directors and president.<sup>29</sup> Based on their salary, the Board of Directors and president appear as only minor positions. In reality, the Board of Directors and the president together wielded all the real power in the Westlands'

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<sup>25</sup> B.E. Martin to Senator Gaylord Nelson, March 24, 1976, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Resolutions Approving By-Laws of Westlands Water District*, March 7, 1966, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> *Resolutions Approving By-Laws of Westlands Water District*, March 7, 1966, 6-7.

governing body through by-laws specifying their responsibilities as the duty to “manage and conduct the business and affairs of the District.”<sup>30</sup> Leaving the position of most importance without a salary was not coincidental, but was instead an intentional deterrent to unfavorable candidates attempting to take power from the landowning elite. Therefore, the lack of salary, coupled with land requirements, served to prevent all but excess landholders from serving on the Westlands’ governing body. Although this undemocratic voting system was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1971 because it clearly favors the wealthy and large landowners, governor Ronald Reagan protected this election system by passing special legislation.<sup>31</sup> As late as 1976, the over-representation of excess landowners is visible through their positions among the Board of Directors.<sup>32</sup> When a seat on the Board of Directors opened up for election in 1975, the NLP offered a candidate, who would have been the first-ever family farm-friendly representative of the WWD. This campaign, supported by newspapers denouncing the undemocratic nature of the election, revealed hopes of having the federal government intervene and create fairer elections.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately for family farmers, there was no federal intervention, and under the rigged election system, agribusiness utilized their overwhelming influence to place one of their representatives on the Westlands governing board.<sup>34</sup> This resulted in excess landholders negotiating all irrigation projects with the Federal government, without allowing family farmers and farm workers to voice their concerns. In other words, excess landowners and agribusinesses were in charge of the government agency specifically tasked with regulating and replacing them with family farmers. Despite the massive conflict of interest, the Board of Directors deemed the matter “too inconsequential” to force board members to recuse themselves.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>31</sup> George L. Baker, “SP, Standard Oil May Benefit Under Westlands Water Deal” in *Fresno Bee*, March 17, 1974, A10.

<sup>32</sup> Ralph M. Brody to Westlands Landowners, August 2, 1976, 2.

<sup>33</sup> John Keller, “Westlands Water District Board wins re-election” in *Fresno Bee*.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Hall, “The ‘Corporate Seats’ On Westlands Board” in *Fresno Bee*, March 7, 1978.

Without farm workers and family farmers at the bargaining table, the Westlands often signed irrigation contracts that benefited excess landholders with the Secretary of the Interior. The Secretary of the Interior and Bureau of Reclamation strongly supported the 160-acre limitation, but were unable to prevent subtle wording in contracts from benefitting excess landholders. For example, the original 1963 contract for the San Luis unit reserved 1,008,000 acre-feet of water for the Westlands, which averages about 2 acre-feet of water per acre.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, this clause did not specify the amount of water eligible lands could receive, which empowered excess landholders to strategically have project water delivered in abundance to carefully selected plots of land. When done correctly, excess landholders were able to pump out irrigation water from the ground, or have water from one acre of land spill into another acre of land nearby that did not receive irrigation water. In practice, this essentially allowed excess landholders to irrigate most, if not all, of their land. This practice quickly caught on among excess landholders and became known as “checkered compliance” [image 4].<sup>36</sup> The “unavoidable clause” of the 1963 contract specifically protected checkered compliance by claiming there was no way of preventing water from spilling onto excess land.<sup>37</sup> Given that a solution to this problem came to fruition two years later, it is unlikely that all parties involved truly believed that water flowing onto excess lands was inevitable. The 1963 contract was only able to heavily favor excess landholders because labor groups were left out of the bargaining table entirely. The lack of labor organizations during negotiations naturally sparked outrage that grew stronger once the contract was made public.

Despite the bureaucratic advantage held by agribusiness, farm workers and family farmers had a strong desire to improve their situation through non-violent forms of activism. More specifically, the NLP rose up to lead a coalition of farm worker organizations. The 1963

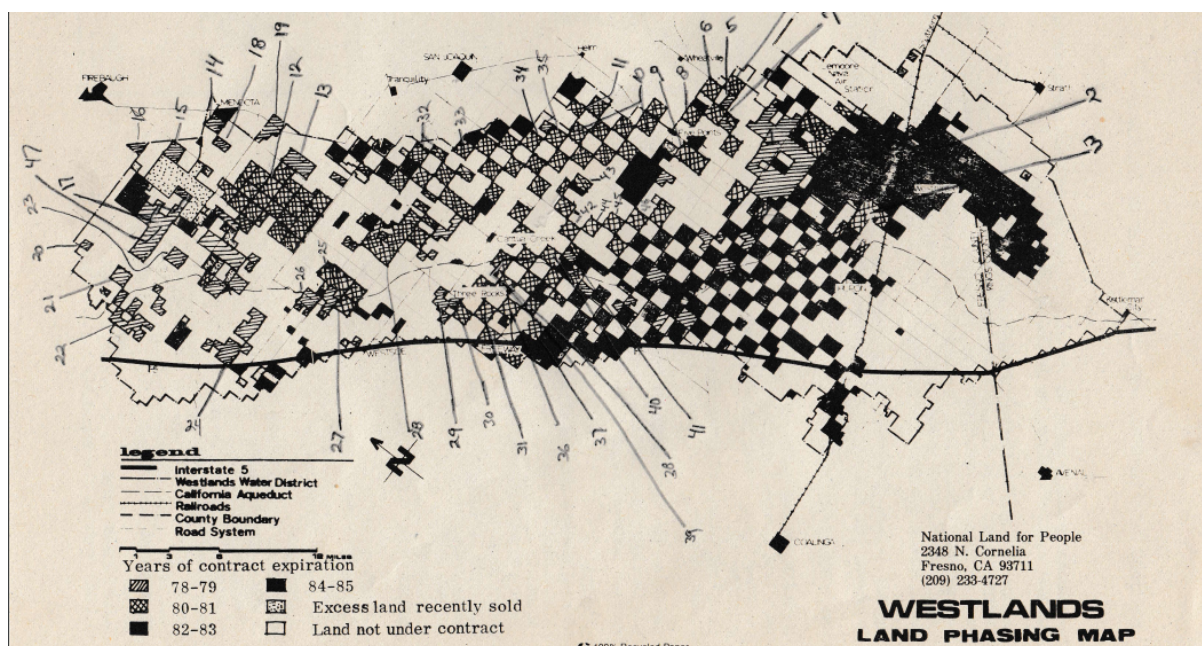
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<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Holum to James L. Vizzard, October 8, 1964, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Holum to Thomas L. Pitts, September 7, 1965, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 3.

contract was unbearable for family farms, and without any opportunity for representation in the governing board, family farmers resorted to directly appealing to the federal government. The NLP frequently met with and wrote to the Secretary of the Interior along with various members of Congress in an effort to convince them of the harm the negotiated contract would bring to the Westlands.



**Image 4:** Map of land sales in the Westlands Water District in 1975. The portion on the right with black and white squares depicts “checked compliance.”<sup>38</sup>

The NLP began their attack on the 1963 contract by meeting directly with the Secretary of the Interior throughout 1964. They expressed their concerns of the 1963 contract having the potential to be exploited by excess landholders. These meetings, pursued by family farmers, proved to be highly effective, convincing the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall, to agree to various amendments before 1965.<sup>39</sup> The amendments to the 1963 contract removed the “unavoidable clause,” limited the amount of water eligible lands could receive and created a tax on land to incentivize excess landholders to sell their unused lands.<sup>40</sup> The

<sup>38</sup> “Westlands Land Phasing Map,” 1977.

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Holum to James L. Vizzard, October 8, 1964, 4.

<sup>40</sup> George Taylor to Andrew J. Biemiller, October 9, 1964, 1-2.

NLP did not stop their efforts after receiving approval from Udall on the amendments, immediately beginning to lobby Congress to approve of the amendments as well.<sup>41</sup> These efforts did not go to waste and resulted in the amendments receiving approval from all sides. Although acceptance of the amendments in 1964 was a decisive legislative victory for family farmers against agribusiness, it was only the result of one legal battle in the midst of the continued campaign by excess landholders to undermine the Reclamation Act. For the following battles, the strategy employed in the approval of the 1964 amendments set a precedent for the NLP to follow in future battles against excess landowners.

In theory, the 1964 amendments prevented the San Luis unit from benefiting excess landholders. And yet, some issues remained unresolved with the biggest problem being tied to the creation of the San Luis unit. The Bureau of Reclamation approved the San Luis to be fully built, despite 70% of land in the Westlands being held excess landowners.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, multiple ownership remained highly controversial because it allowed excess landholders to claim “technical compliance” with the Reclamation Act of 1902.<sup>43</sup> The tax proposed in the 1964 amendments only incentivized excess landholders to sell their unused lands, but did not guarantee their compliance. The NLP was not ignorant to these concerns, and successfully developed the Operator Agreement of 1965 and got the Secretary of the Interior to sign off on it. The agreement almost guaranteed that excess landholders would sell their excess lands, by limiting water deliveries to 3 acre-feet for every acre of eligible land and requiring the Westlands to return any unused water to the San Luis drain.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the operating agreement established an ad valorem tax (property tax proportionate to the value of the land) on all land in the Westlands.<sup>45</sup> With their wealth being slowly taxed away, excess landowners

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Holum to Thomas L. Pitts, September 7, 1965, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Holum to Thomas L. Pitts, September 7, 1965, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

were pressured into redistributing their lands. The operating agreement did not strictly guarantee that excess landholders were going to sell off all of their excess lands. However, this operating agreement, alongside the Reclamation Act's anti-speculation clause, which required excess lands to be sold at pre-irrigation values, did create a situation where excess landholders would not benefit from holding onto their excess lands. The requirement of having surplus water returned to the drain essentially ended the possibility of "checkered compliance." In short, the NLP forced excess landowners into a position where they were unable to profit from their excess lands because water deliveries were limited while the anti-speculation clause of the Reclamation Act prohibited land sales at market rates.

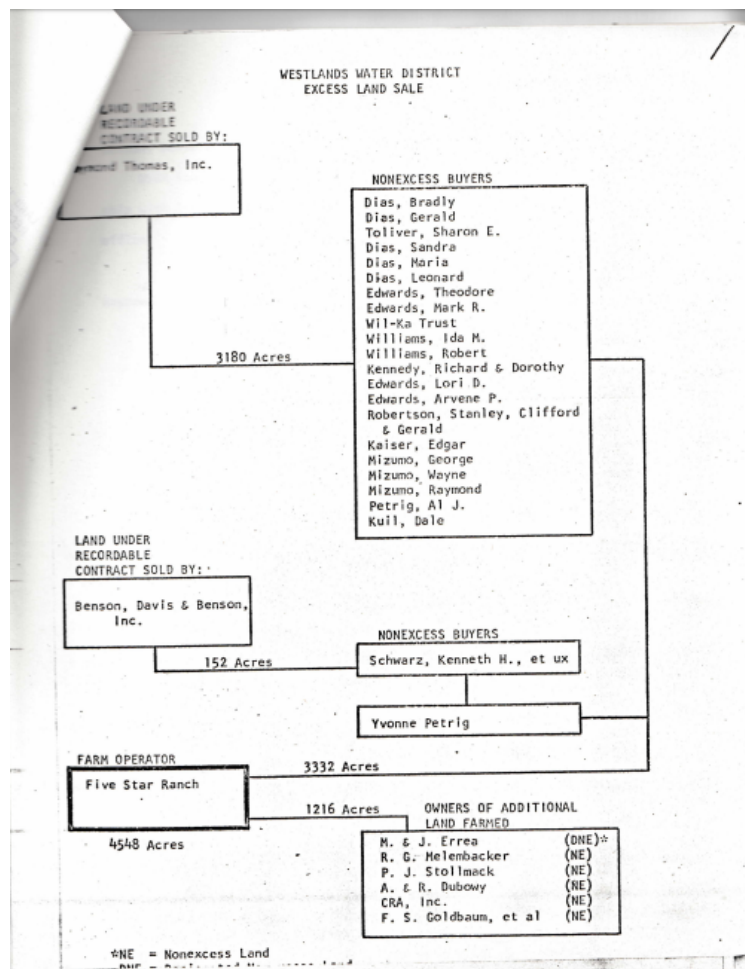
The NLP cornered excess landowners into selling their lands at pre-irrigation rates, but alas, the economic pressure placed on excess landowners was not enough to force them into compliance with the Reclamation Act. In a perfect world, this strategy may have been enough to effectively redistribute land, but excess landowners exploited loopholes in the law to avoid compliance. Shortly after establishing the ad valorem tax, the Bureau ceded control of the tax over to the governing body of the Westlands in return for a promise to speed up land redistribution.<sup>46</sup> The tax was also meant to even out the tax burden on growers in the Westlands and assure meeting a 40-year repayment plan for irrigation technologies. On paper, the ad valorem tax does serve as excellent economic pressure for unused excess lands to be sold, but ceding control to the Westlands limited its effectiveness. Only the Westlands Water District's Board of Directors decided how much and when to levy the tax.<sup>47</sup> The Board of Directors, very much controlled by excess landowners, empowered their compatriots to tax themselves, which effectively nullified the intended impact of the ad valorem tax. As a result,

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<sup>46</sup> George J. Lanning to David Weiman, July 12, 1975.

<sup>47</sup> Paul S. Taylor, "SOME REASONS WHY IT IS NECESSARY TO HOLD A FURTHER HEARING ON NON-ENFORCEMENT OF THE EXCESS LAND LAWS ON CENTRAL VALLEY PROJECT, AND ESPECIALLY ON ITS SAN LUIS UNIT AT WESTLANDS," February 15, 1966, 3-4.

excess landowners easily kept possession of their lands in spite of the operating agreement's intent to redistribute land.



**Image 5:** Chart shows the movement of land from a former excess landowning corporation to a sister corporation. Lands were sold to friends and family, then those individuals would allow for the same corporation to operate their lands, allowing for all land to be irrigated legally.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from using “checked compliance” on excess lands for production, the Westlands actively approved sales that allowed for agribusiness to lease all lands. For example, in 1975, 32,497 acres of land were sold to 272 people, but only 23 operators existed in the water district.<sup>49</sup> This was the result of land buyers leasing those lands to a corporation they had personal connections to, allowing excess landowners to irrigate all of their lands effectively [Image 5]. Thus through operatorships, large landowners managed to find a new

<sup>48</sup> “Westlands Water District Disposition of Excess Land as of June 1975,” 10.

<sup>49</sup> “Westlands Water District Disposition of Excess Land as of June 1975,” 1.

loophole to continue profiting off their excess lands. In short, the Westlands cooperated with the Bureau of Reclamation to secure water deliveries but actively sought compliance in the legal sense, while avoiding actual land redistribution as the Reclamation Act intended. Thus, land redistribution can not be brought by economic pressure alone because agribusiness has the resources to actively seek methods that minimize economic pressures. Direct administrative action is the only means for land redistribution to actually occur.

In summary, farm workers demonstrated their desire to achieve upward mobility by swiftly mobilizing in the 1960s to solve issues with contracts associated with the San Luis unit, prior to its construction. The NLP utilized non-violent forms of activism by lobbying federal officials, which proved successful in the passing of new legislation that aimed to address the concerns described by the NLP. However, the new legislation did not go far enough to effectively redistribute land from agribusiness for family farms, because excess landowners exploited a few loopholes in the Reclamation Act. As a result, agribusiness maintained a strong presence well into the 1970s.

### **The Collapse of the NLP: The End of an Era, but the Fight Continues**



**Image 6:** Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt (Left) and U.S. President Ronald Reagan (Right) at the signing of the Reform Reclamation Act.

The battle over the Reclamation Act in Congress was far from successful for National Land for People, due to the passing of the Reform Reclamation Act (RRA) in 1982. The RRA essentially eliminated the land limit by allowing all land to receive irrigation water, but any land excess of 960 acres had to pay three times the normal water rate. However, the tripled water rate covered less than half the actual cost of water.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the RRA guaranteed the survival of excess landowners into the present day and allowed for all water excess landowners received to be heavily subsidized. The NLP fought valiantly through the use of newspapers, documentaries, and lobbying, but were ultimately unable to overcome the influence excess landowners had over Congress.

Upon learning about the RRA, the NLP expanded their traditional approach to combating agribusiness by appealing to the public at large. More specifically, the NLP began to frequently publish in newspapers across the West arguing in favor of the Reclamation Act. These articles spotlighted academic studies that backed family farms, but avoided using academic language that plagued those studies.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, alternative sources of news, like the radio and television, were utilized to spread the NLP's message. The NLP did this by participating in and promoting documentary films, such as "The Battle of Westlands," which, like the newspapers, informed audiences of reports that painted family farms in a positive light.<sup>52</sup> All three avenues, newspapers, film and radio, aimed to raise awareness of the RRA among the general public and all three urged audiences to let their Congressional representatives know their stance on the RRA.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the NLP continued their non-violent activism by appealing to a much larger audience through accessible news outlets.

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<sup>50</sup> Leo Rennert, "Panel triples price of water for big farms" in *Fresno Bee*, June 12, 1980.

<sup>51</sup> George Ballis, "'What Is The Truth?'" in *Fresno Bee*, December 26, 1976.

<sup>52</sup> Bernice Woolf to Carol Mon Pere, February 18, 1980.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Kernan, "Watered Down 'Westlands' on WETA" in *The Washington Post*, March 20, 1980.

Appealing to the public struck fear into excess landowners as they responded by limiting the audience for NLP's media campaign. For example, the documentary, "The Battle of Westlands" was prohibited from being aired on public television in the state of Washington for over a month, and once it was allowed to be aired (after a lawsuit threat), a postscript show that was added.<sup>54</sup> Washington's PBS station described the show as an unbiased discussion of the RRA, but it turned out to be a debate that overcomplicated the issue for the average viewer that devolved into a shouting match, preventing anyone from understanding what was being said.<sup>55</sup> Thus, agribusiness sabotaged the NLP's efforts to raise public awareness of the RRA. Furthermore, excess landowners channeled their wealth through the farmowner group, Westside Farmers to fund various research projects, like William McFarlane's "Productivity -- The Cornerstone of Rural Development" which argued large farms were better for the economy than family farms were.<sup>56</sup> Funds were provided for similar research projects to be presented at public conferences attended by people of various backgrounds.<sup>57</sup> Apart from their funding of research projects, excess landowners managed to channel their wealth into donations to buy favor and influence from Congress members.<sup>58</sup> Taken together, they helped offset the influence NLP had over Congress. As a result, the RRA was signed into law, assuring agribusiness a legal existence up to the present.

The Reform Reclamation Act effectively repealed the Reclamation Act of 1902, reverberating into the Westlands following its application. The RRA ended all possibility of family farmers replacing agribusiness in the Westlands. Despite this, it is important to note that prior to 1980, it effectively limited excess landowners from exploiting the law. Rather

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

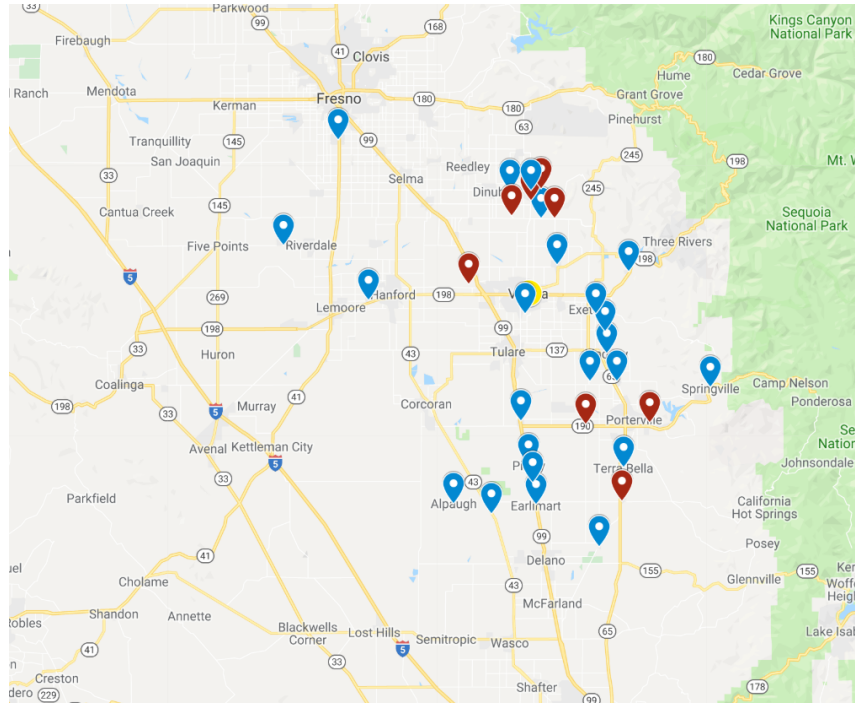
<sup>56</sup> William F. McFarlane, "Productivity - The Cornerstone of Rural Development," presented to the International Geographical Union Symposium, "Rural Development: Theory and Practice" April 24, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> William F. McFarlane, "Productivity - The Cornerstone of Rural Development," presented to the International Geographical Union Symposium, "Rural Development: Theory and Practice" April 24, 1981.

<sup>58</sup> "Water," in *Fresno Bee*, 2.

than fighting violently, seizing land for family farmers, or mirroring the United Farm Workers by protesting and boycotting agribusinesses that marginalized farmworkers, the NLP resisted with legal activism. The NLP maintained a strong presence in all contract negotiations, rallied citizens to urge Congress to limit the injustices in the Westlands, and placed pressure on the Bureau of Reclamation and Secretary of the Interior by denouncing the bad practices of the Westlands. The NLP struggled, but they managed to fight just enough to prevent excess landowners from enjoying complete impunity as they exploited loopholes in the Reclamation Act of 1902. Ultimately, the NLP met defeat, but their demise should not overshadow the effectiveness of farm workers in holding excess landowners to a standstill. Nor should the disbandment of the NLP describe farm workers as a helpless community. Despite their economic disadvantages to landowners, through activism farm workers demonstrated a strong desire to improve their situation and nearly succeeded.

Communities in the San Joaquin Valley continue to feel the ramifications of the NLP's defeat to this very day. Numerous unincorporated communities in the Valley, shown below, suffer from the lack of clean affordable water. These farm-worker dominated communities are surrounded by farms that have no trouble securing enough water to support their crops, but refuse to give up its water allocations to improve the quality of life for their farm laborers. Rural communities in the Valley continue to suffer from great wealth disparities, but they are in no way a broken community. Although unsuccessful, the NLP demonstrates that farm workers not only desire to improve their situation, but are more than capable of battling the injustices of water districts through activism. The NLP has shown that the battle is difficult to wage, but if a reinvigorated resistance arises again, they will enjoy some level of success. Furthermore, a sustained resistance against corporate farms can successfully transform the Valley into a place for family farmers to flourish.



**Image 7:** Map showing unincorporated communities that suffer from a lack of clean water. These communities are condensed in the San Joaquin Valley between Fresno and Bakersfield, not too far from the Westlands.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Where We Work,” (Community Water Center), [https://www.communitywatercenter.org/where\\_we\\_work](https://www.communitywatercenter.org/where_we_work).

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