

# President Obama visits Los Banos farmer Del Bosque

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President Barack Obama, second from left, walks and talks with governor Jerry Brown, far left, and farming couple Joe De Bosque, second from right, and his wife Maria Gloria De Bosque, far right, on the couple's farmland south of Los Banos, Calif. on Friday, February 14, 2014. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — Fresno Bee Staff Photo

LOS BANOS — President Barack Obama took a whirlwind tour Friday of the central San Joaquin Valley's drought-damaged farm country, getting a look at fallowed dirt and hosting a roundtable discussion with farmers, farm representatives, environmentalists and politicians.

The president spent barely three hours in the Valley before flying on to Southern California, where he is scheduled to meet with King Abdullah II of Jordan at the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage.

But taking a seat at a horseshoe table inside a cavernous metal San Luis Water District maintenance building on the west side of Fresno County, about 18 miles west of Firebaugh, Obama tried to assure roundtable participants that California's importance as a farm producer makes the state's water problems a national concern.

"I wanted to come here to listen," the president said during brief opening remarks before the roundtable event was closed to reporters. "We are going to stay on top of this because it has national implications."

The president said he's been well-warned about the history of water politics in California -- politics he said he did not want to get mired in "because I want to get out alive on Valentine's Day.'

Turning serious, the president added that long-term solutions to water would be required.

"Water has been seen as a zero sum game: agriculture against urban, north against south," Obama said. "We're going to have to figure out how to play a different game. We can't afford years of litigation and no real action."

About 25 people were invited to join the roundtable discussion. Participants included a range of people -- from U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Rep. Jim Costa to United Farm Workers President Arturo Rodriguez, Westlands Water District General Manager Thomas Birmingham, Nisei Farmers League CEO Manuel Cunha and Fresno Community Food Bank CEO Andy Souza.

California is in its third dry year, and this winter so far is one of the driest on record. Both state and federal water projects have told farmers to expect no water this year.

Prior to the president's arrival, the White House announced several steps that the president will take to deal with the drought.

The drought assistance includes speeded-up livestock disaster assistance for California producers, provided under a newly signed farm bill, as well as targeted conservation assistance, watershed protection funds, additional summer feeding programs and emergency community water grants.

By directing Agriculture Department staff to make the livestock assistance a "top priority," officials say they expect to provide California producers an estimated \$100 million for 2014 losses and up to \$50 million for losses in previous years.

Following the roundtable meeting, Los Banos farmer Joe Del Bosque of Empresas Del Bosque, Inc. gave the president, dressed in slacks and rolled-up shirt sleeves, a tour of a field that will lay

fallow because he doesn't have enough water to grow a crop. Gov. Jerry Brown, who joined the president on the tour, last month announced a statewide drought emergency.

During comments following the tour, Obama told reporters that climate change will require rethinking how to meet the needs of all water users -- farmers, city residents, industry and the environment, and not just in California.

"California is our biggest economy. California is our biggest agricultural producer. Whatever happens here happens to everybody," the president said.

Three of Valley's Republican congressmen -- Reps. Devin Nunes of Tulare, David Valadao of Hanford and Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield -- said in response to the president's visit that the main need is long-term plan for reliable water.

"As farmers, farmworkers and communities in the San Joaquin Valley suffer, this administration has chosen handouts and a climate change lecture over real solutions," said Valadao. "We feed the world and all we ask for is a reliable, clean water supply. I will remind the president that my constituents are part of the environment too, and the lack of a long-term solution could spell economic and social destruction for the Central Valley."

Barry Bedwell, president of the Fresno-based Grape and Tree Fruit League, was among those who met with the president during a roundtable discussion about the drought.

Bedwell said the president and agriculture secretary Tom Vilsack were clear that they were in the Valley to supply immediate relief. But the conversation also turned to finding long-term solutions including water storage and conveyance.

"The message we wanted to convey is that this is an issue that is impacting not just one region, but the whole state and that there needs to be a cooperative effort to help solve this issue," Bedwell said.

This is Obama's first visit to the central San Joaquin Valley, and although he scheduled no public events, his landing aboard Air Force One drew large crowds to Fresno Yosemite International Airport.

At least 500 people gathered Friday afternoon outside the airport to catch a glimpse of Air Force One. Hundreds parked along the west side of the airport on Chestnut Avenue, between Dakota and Shields avenues.

"It's a very special moment for everybody," said Mario Rodriguez, 48, of Fresno, who played The Star-Spangled Banner on his trumpet as he waited for President Obama to land.

"I'm sorry but I'm going to make some noise -- Hail to the chief!" Rodriguez said of his trumpet playing. "It comes from my heart."

Rodriguez grew up working in the fields as a farmworker and hopes the president can help California through the drought: "There are lots of people out there who need vegetables, fruits, to make it through life and that's what we are here for."

Closer to the terminal, packs of dozens pressed their faces up against chain link fence, gazing out across the runway to see the enormous plane.

Some Fresno groups also showed up, including Peace Fresno and Central Valley Tea Party.

The president's plane landed at Fresno Yosemite International Airport about 2:40 p.m., carrying the president and three California Democrats: Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer and Rep. Jim Costa.

They were greeted at the bottom of the stairway by Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, who tried to make the most of her three minutes with Obama.

Swearingin had said earlier this week that she wanted just five minutes with Obama to make her case for more federal help in fighting poverty and unemployment in Fresno. The absence of anyone else in the receiving line enabled her to get three uninterrupted minutes before the president made his way to Marine One.

Obama waved to the cameras but did not stop to take questions. Swearingin was surrounded by reporters once Obama was gone.

"I thanked the president for being here," Swearingin said. The drought "clearly is an issue of national significance. I welcomed him and thanked him for his attention to this issue.

"But I also made sure to point out that we have long-standing issues of poverty and unemployment in the city of Fresno even when we have plenty of water. The drought makes everything worse. But we also want to deal with long-standing chronic issues that face us in the Valley."

Obama "committed to helping us," Swearingin said. "He certainly wants to be part of the solution here in Fresno. I asked for help from his cabinet secretaries. I asked him to say yes to Fresno."

Read more here: <http://www.mercedsunstar.com/2014/02/13/3495872/obama-to-make-brief-stop-at-los.html#storylink=cpy>