



Western Growers  
17620 Fitch St  
Irvine, CA 92614

Statement of

Tom Nassif  
President & CEO  
Western Growers

before

Division of Water Rights  
State Water Resources Control Board

Re: Public Hearing on Petition to Revise the Declaration of Fully Appropriated Stream System of the Kern River

October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Western Growers represents the fresh vegetable, fruit and tree nut industries in California and Arizona, and has nearly 200 members from Kern and Tulare counties. Combined, Kern and Tulare counties produce more than \$9 billion worth of agricultural products each year (\$4 billion and \$5 billion, respectively). Almost half (\$4.3 billion) comes from vegetable, fruit and tree nut production. Because of the direct interests of our membership, the size of the agricultural industry in Kern and Tulare counties, and the significant economic benefits the industry provides the region and state, Western Growers is paying close attention to the decision of the State Water Resources Control Board regarding the petition to revise the declaration of fully appropriated stream system of the Kern River.

Western Growers recognizes that since the 1870s, available Kern River water supplies have been continuously diverted and used to irrigate a wide variety of agricultural commodities. The result has been the development of one of the most agriculturally rich regions in the world. According to the Department of Conservation Division of Land Resource Protection, Kern and Tulare counties are home to more than 1 million acres of prime farmland<sup>1</sup> (640,000 acres and 380,000 acres, respectively).<sup>2</sup> In Kern County alone, 320,000 of these acres have been developed in association with substantial “pre-1914” Kern River water rights established by agricultural users in the region.

Irrigated agriculture is a key component of the economy of Kern and Tulare counties. However, the industry has already been hit hard by the recent statewide drought and court-imposed restrictions on water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Friant Dam. With the availability of state and federal water supplies being dramatically cut, any reductions in the availability of local Kern River water supplies for agriculture will further aggravate these impacts.

Because the Kern River is the most significant local source of water for farmers in the region, it is extremely important for the State Water Resources Control Board to preserve the historic use of Kern River surface water supplies by agriculture. Without such protections, irrigated agriculture will have to

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<sup>1</sup> Prime farmland is defined as farmland with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term agricultural production. This land has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields.

<sup>2</sup> All total, farmers in Kern and Tulare counties farmed on nearly 2.5 million acres of land in 2008.

increase its reliance on limited groundwater resources, which could create a negative impact on groundwater supply and increase agricultural production costs by between \$100 and \$250 per acre. It is ironic that much of the added costs will be attributed to substantial increases in energy use, which is inconsistent with efforts to reduce carbon emissions and greenhouse gases in California.

With a drastically reduced and significantly more expensive water supply, the result will be a reduction in the amount of farmland in production in Kern and Tulare counties. Based on the recent experience of farming communities on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, less acreage in production will lead to an exacerbation of the already extreme levels of unemployment in local communities, along with the subsequent ripple effect on related industries and the overall regional economy. Not to mention the fact that reduced production will result in higher food prices for all consumers.

Kern River water is the most significant local source of water available for agriculture in the region and vital to the existing agricultural economy of Kern and Tulare counties. For this reason, the historic uses of Kern River water must remain a reliable and stable supply for the region, and must remain at historical levels without reduction. Without certainty in the future supply of Kern River water, the necessary capital investment for long-term operation of this productive agricultural economy cannot be maintained.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.