

## The Imperial Valley Socioeconomic Improvement Committee (Local Entity)

Comments for the State Water Resources Control Board Public Hearing Regarding the Water Transfer between the Imperial Irrigation District and the San Diego County Water Authority

Comments sent by Kimberly Collins, Coordinator for the Local Entity on behalf of the Committee

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### Background to the Local Entity

The Local Entity is a community based group designed by the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) and San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA) as part of the 2004 water transfer agreement. Its main function is to work through the complex task of deciding how best to develop a socioeconomic mitigation plan that equitably and fairly mitigates those negatively impacted by the land fallowing program. Finally, the contract requires and the committee believes that the mitigation plan should be based upon the results from the economist panel as much as possible.

Through a strategic planning process, the Local Entity developed its mission and vision statements. The **mission** of the Local Entity is to provide a forum for the local community to identify and mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of land fallowing. The **vision** of the Local Entity is to insure that the Imperial Valley is protected from the effects of land fallowing through proactive and creative solutions.

This committee is defined by the Revised Fourth Amendment of the Imperial Irrigation District/San Diego County Water Authority water transfer agreement. It is comprised of 11 members from the Imperial Valley representing the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) (two members), Imperial County (two members), Imperial Valley Association of Governments (two members), the Imperial Valley Joint Chambers of Commerce (one member), farming interests (one member), farm workers (one member), and two at-large members who are appointed by the rest of the committee.

The Local Entity faces several challenges in the decision-making process:

- As a community group, the decision-making process is complex and long. This is natural in order to permit a voice for all of the different members represented in the process. Because of this lengthy process, there is much misdirected criticism of the Local Entity.
- There are a number of challenges regarding authority and communication. This is primarily based on the desire of different groups to each control the situation for its own best interests, which is not surprising but makes operations difficult.
- Finally, the turnover of members and the learning curve for new members further exasperates the decision-making process.

These challenges are based on the fact that the Local Entity must work in cross jurisdictional lines steeped in politics. This committee was developed on a fundamental disagreement between IID and SDCWA regarding the actual impacts that will occur in the community because of land fallowing. This disagreement between IID and SDCWA has not been resolved to date and has made the advancement of the Local Entity's activities difficult. Furthermore, this disagreement has manifested itself into the reports by the economist panel. Through which, the data or facts are to be used by the Local Entity to develop its mitigation plan.

To complicate matters further, there are a number of conflicts and divergent views within the Imperial Valley community on the best way to mitigate for fallowing. This has also inhibited the Local Entity from completing its primary task of developing and implementing a mitigation plan.

#### Update of Program

The Local Entity members have been working with the various members of the Imperial Valley community to reach an accord regarding the best way to financially mitigate for the socioeconomic impacts in the region. A mitigation plan has been drafted by the Local Entity and the committee is currently working with the Imperial County Farm Bureau and Imperial-Mexicali Improvement Collaborative (the Collaborative) to refine the language in this plan.

The Imperial County Farm Bureau's comments are primarily based on adding a policy to allow for reimbursement of losses or direct compensation by agriculture supply businesses. The Bureau has developed a formula to calculate how much each business would receive. Additionally, a policy of first come, first receive would be need to be adopted because there might not be sufficient funds to reimburse all those with losses. In order to prove their loss, the agriculture service provider business will need to have a form signed by a grower indicating the grower would have used the agriculture supplier's services but for fallowing. The Collaborative's comments and suggestions focused on details within the Local Entity's plan, such as allowable administrative costs, the length of time allowable for projects to be conducted, etc.

Both groups within the Local Entity, those who support reimbursement and those who support mitigation, believe that their plan is the best for the Imperial Valley businesses. Those who support reimbursement state that the businesses that are impacted first would receive direct compensation to keep them working until the fallowing program has ended. If these businesses are directly assisted, it will flow down into the community, helping workers and government alike.

Those who support mitigation state that a proactive plan needs to be developed to deal with the impacts of the land fallowing program on business, labor, local government, and the whole community. This opinion comes from the diverse membership of the board and the desire to assist the entire community impacted by the fallowing program, not just one business sector. The fundamental disagreement between the two policies has created tremendous tension in the community.

The Local Entity voted at its September 14, 2005 meeting to not provide direct compensation or reimbursements for losses to agriculture service providers. As stated earlier, a subcommittee of the Local Entity is currently meeting with the Farm Bureau and the Collaborative to refine the language and make sure that those directly impacted have a fair and equitable process by which to obtain assistance.

#### A Final Note

The majority involved primarily treat the transfer as an economic issue. The greatest preoccupation is how much money the community is going to receive or how much San Diego County Water Authority is going to pay. What this viewpoint overlooks is that for many of the residents in the Imperial Valley, this transfer is perceived as a threat to a way-of-life. The history and culture of the Valley is tied to farming and water, since water is the basis for life in the desert. Without it, the community cannot survive.

Finally, there are many questions that cannot be answered through an economic model. The current economist panel report does not accurately reflect the losses in the Imperial Valley. How then can this report be expected to put a value on concepts such as business goodwill and social capital? In short, the continuing debate on how to measure adequately the economic impacts of the fallowing of farmland to transfer water to San Diego County does not take into consideration years of hard work and perseverance, the destruction of a way-of-life, and the potential breaking apart of a community.