

Calif. groundwater depletion could be catastrophic

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

LOS BANOS — Flat as a tabletop, the furrowed, brown farm fields east of this San Joaquin Valley town are some of the most productive on Earth.

Every spring, they are planted with a smorgasbord of crops that in one form or another are trucked to grocery stores across America, from fresh juicy tomatoes to freeze-dried onion flakes, honeydew melons to tortilla chips.

Now that bounty is threatened by a crisis of geological proportions: The land is sinking — crippling the region's irrigation and flood control infrastructure and damaging aquifers that are buffers against climate change.

Nature, though, is not to blame. This problem is self-inflicted, driven by the frontier-style exploitation of the last unregulated resource in California: groundwater.

"We are looking at a material impact of a magnitude that is potentially catastrophic," said Cannon Michael, a sixth-generation farmer who grows tomatoes, onions and other crops near Los Banos.

Today's drama is only the latest chapter in a long-running saga of sinking. Three generations ago, so much groundwater was pumped from aquifers that half the valley sank like a giant pie crust, sagging 28 feet near Mendota and inflicting damage to irrigation canals, pipelines, bridges, roads and other infrastructure.

What stopped it were two massive government-funded irrigation efforts — the federal Central Valley Project and California

State Water Project – that flooded the region with water from distant California mountains, relieving pressure on the area's natural underground water supply. But the fix was temporary. Today, drought, climate change and other forces have unleashed a new era of groundwater pumping, triggering some of the worst land subsidence ever seen in California. Near Michael's farm, the valley is predicted to drop 17 feet by 2060.

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