

Californians seek support for land controversy

By JOYCE BUPP
Staff correspondent

GREEN BAY, Wis. — They call it the 160-acre "big lie."

"They are family farm operators in 17 western states, especially California, affected by the new interpretations of Department of Interior regulations on ownership of "excess property" within federal water districts. California women attending the recent convention of American Agri-Women in Green Bay, Wis. briefed delegates on the controversial Bureau changes and asked for nationwide support from affiliated organizations in contacting representatives regarding the 160-acre limitations.

Approximately nine million acres come under the water district laws, with 640,000 acres alone in California's Fresno and Kern Counties. Growers there view the federal crackdown on large family land holdings as a prelude to increased strangleholds by the bureaucracy on established American farming practices.

Under the new interpretations of the 1902 Reclamation Act, no person or legal entity receiving purchased federal water for agricultural uses may own more than 160 acres and lease more than 160 acres. Water is the lifeblood of the region. Rich and productive with abundant moisture, the land remains arid and nearly useless when deprived of life-giving water supplies. Some ground wells are available for irrigation purposes, but federal irrigation waters have enabled the land to bloom and produce an impressive array of table vegetables and fruits. Because of the nature of farming carried on in the Westland valleys, growers cite the need for at least 1000 acres of land to constitute a basic bare-minimum farm unit.

New operating regulations devised by the department of the Interior are a drastic change from previous interpretations of the

legislation and leave the fate of existing contracts for federal water between land owners and the government hanging in the air.

When land owners signing recordable contracts had been originally notified that they would have to dispose of excess lands over the 160-acre limits, they were given 10 years to sell. The land price and choice of buyer was to the seller's discretion. Many planned to sell to relatives, friends and employees, then lease back the land and continue their present type of farming operations.

Under the new interpretations, sales to multiple ownerships, such as partnerships, family corporations, joint tenancies or trust are prohibited, except when a direct family relationship exists among all members. That family relationship includes only persons in a direct lineal descendant relationship, children either natural or adopted, and their spouses.

Property owners must live on or within a 50-mile radius of the property; however the Secretary of the Interior has the discretion to impose a more stringent residency requirement, if deemed necessary to create a populous living on the land. The 160-acre limitation applies to all federal water districts; an owner receiving federal water may not possess any property in more than one district. Sellers of the excesslands would be prohibited from leasing land back from the buyer. On future recordable contracts, the 10 year disposal time has been shortened to five years.

But perhaps the interpretation that has property owners most upset is the decision to dispose of excess lands by lottery. Excess property owners not selling lands within the 10 years on present contracts will find the government taking care of that problem for them. Selling price to lottery winners is set at a cost approved by the Bureau, estimated by the property owners to be ap-

proximately one-half of the land's actual value. Government funds will help lottery land winners finance their purchases through loans.

California area growers have taken the lead in protesting the drastic changes in interpretation of the federal water district regulations, with California Women for Agriculture spearheading testimony and letter-writing efforts. Many of the farm wives involved represent family corporate farms, working land owned or leased for several generations.

"We simply have to just get out of farming," says a resigned and upset Carol Harris, of Coalinga R1, Fresno County, California. "It's a purge of the most efficient and best operators."

The Harris' are involved in a family farm encompassing 20,000 acres, with 20 per cent of the land owned and the remainder leased; their grape and cotton operation is one of the largest falling under the Department of Interior winners, determined at random, for the

Bureau-established figure of \$750 per acre.

"Farming as we do requires many acres and large equipment to do it efficiently," adds Mrs. Harris. "The land is already supporting as many families through our operation as it efficiently can. When lottery winners, buying with the help of our tax monies, end up not being able to make a living off acreages too small economically, we'll find ourselves then supporting them through other government-aid programs."

"Someone has arbitrarily decided that it's not a family farm any longer when you hire more than two people," concluded the California farm wife.

Mona Telles, of Firebaugh, Cal., is another Fresno County farm resident hit by the revised regulations. Part of a family farm corporation, she represents 17,000 acres in cotton, cantaloupes, and lettuce.

"We employ 150 people full-time, year round," she

noted. "If that isn't keeping the use of our land to the best possible efficiency, what is? All those people will have to seek new areas of employment when we have to close down because we're cut to farming 320 acres. Where will they go?"

The women urged all farm owners across the country to contact their representatives with background information and comments on ways the proposed revisions may affect their individual future farming rights.

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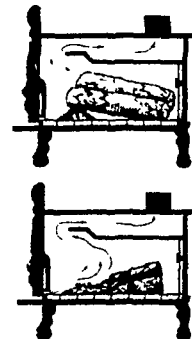
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PARK RIDGE, Ill. — American Farm Bureau president Allan Grant has claimed an important first round victory for farmers fighting federal moves to restrict their acreage holdings to 160 acres.

Grant cited developments of November 14, in a U.S. District Court in Fresno, California that effectively hold up application of 160 acre regulations imposed by Interior Secretary Andrus until a determination can be made whether environmental impact studies will be ordered for affected areas.

The Andrus regulations issued August 25, would limit individual farm ownership to 160 acres where federal water is used; apply new standards to selling off lands in excess of that, with buyers determined by public lottery; and require owner residency to within 50 miles of the farm.

The regulations were to have taken effect around January 1, 1978 after the

November 28 conclusion of current public hearings. But, in legal action filed by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the California Farm Bureau Federation, Andrus has agreed to extend the hearing period to December 31, and to defer final rules until March 1, 1978. And, it is a delay that could be further prolonged if the Court decides favorably on the environmental impact study.

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