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**FRED LUJAN**, 68, saw his trees as his babies, and gave them names. In February, the 10-acre orchard was sprouting leaves. Then a man from the irrigation district came and sealed off the water meter.

# DROUGHT IMPERILS A DREAM

Barber-turned-farmer Fred Lujan was ready to see his pistachio trees bear their first full crop. Then he lost his water supply.

**By Diana Marcum**

REPORTING FROM TERRA BELLA

**A**t first they called Fred Lujan a gentleman farmer.

The retired barber washed his tractor every night and parked it in the garage, a source of gentle amusement to the veteran growers around him. He called his pistachio trees his babies, his girls, and gave them names.

“Come on, Suzanne,” he’d say to his wife in the evenings. “Let’s have a glass of wine and sit outside and watch our girls grow.”

Back when he was still learning to take corners while tilling, he sliced one of the saplings. The other farmers told him to pull it out,

the tree wouldn’t make it. But he wrapped the trunk in mud and water and tape the way his grandfather, born on an Indian reservation, had taught him.

He named the tree Survivor.

Eight years later, Survivor and the other trees were ready to give their first mature crop. In February, the 10-acre orchard was sprouting spring leaves.

Then a man from the irrigation district came and sealed off Lujan’s water meter. A green tag read “No Irrigation Water Is Available This Year.” There was a \$10,000 fine for breaking the seal.



**LUJAN CALLS** farming “the most amazing thing” and says he wants to see his trees “give what they are meant to give. Gosh, who doesn’t love a pistachio?”

For the first time in the more than half a century that the federal government had been diverting Sierra Nevada water to farmers, there would be no deliveries to most Central Valley irrigation districts. In the third year of drought, there wasn’t enough water to go around.

It was a blow to the entire region, but a possible death knell to Terra Bella, whose pistachio and citrus groves are watered only by rain and the government’s canals.

“How am I supposed to just sit here and watch everything turn brown and die?” asked Lujan, 68.

Still, it was February and pistachio trees are drought-resistant. It just had to rain during March and April. He was sure it would.



Sean Geivet had known the news was going to be bad. It had been the driest 13-month period in more than 100 years on the winter day the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced water allocations. The Terra Bella Irrigation District manager ran through options in his head.

If the feds said a 25% allocation, most of the area’s 700 citrus growers could still bring in a crop. If it was 10%, that was

enough to at least keep the trees alive and try again next year.

He was so lost in thought that a deputy pulled him over for speeding.

“There must have been something in my face — he asked me what had happened. I told him I was about to hear for the first time in our history that we wouldn’t have water,” Geivet said.

He didn’t get a ticket, but 20 minutes later he sat in his office trying to digest news worse than he’d imagined.

“With zero percent, there are no options. The citrus trees are dead by July,” he said. “The nut trees stop producing.”

Growers began dropping off checks with Geivet, authorizing him to buy emergency water from wherever he could, for up to \$1,200 an acre foot, six times the usual price. (An acre foot is the amount it takes to cover one acre of ground a foot deep in water or enough to supply two households for a year.)

“Geez Louise! Twelve hundred dollars,” Lujan said. “Who has that kind of money? That’s only for the big boys.”

It rained in March — barely.

“It smelled so good. It sounded so pretty,” Lujan said.





**RESIDENTS OF TERRA BELLA** shop at an outdoor flea market where vendors sell their used wares. The drought has hit the small agricultural town hard, and most of its commercial corridor is shuttered.

It's the last time he saw rain.



The Lujans put a bucket in the shower to catch the water while it warmed up and used that to water the three fruit trees — peach, nectarine and plum — at the side of the house. They bought bottled water to drink and used tap water to keep their small garden alive.

Two weeks after irrigation water was cut, domestic water was rationed. Most of the 6,000 people who live in Terra Bella and whose children attend school here are immigrant farmworkers. They would have drinking water — about half the amount they usually got — but little work.

"There's so many worse off than us," Suzanne said. "But we tried so hard to do everything right, to plan ahead."

The couple once lived in a two-story house in the city of Porterville. They had a swimming pool and a Jacuzzi, new cars in the garage. They went to Hawaii on their 50th anniversary.

They had saved for retirement. But as they watched Fred's mother grow older

and face ill health, they decided their nest egg wouldn't be enough. They downsized to the small house in Terra Bella and invested in pistachios. Lujan had several cancer operations, and this year he had heart surgery. Their retirement savings dwindled, but the orchard was their safety net.



In May, Survivor and the other trees had blossoms.

The orchard looked more like a Zen garden than a working farm. Fred keeps everything pristine — he and Suzanne doing all the work themselves, other than picking the crop.

"Farming is the most amazing thing you can do," he said. "The ground out here is hard. You put a shovel in there and it bounces right back. But we put these little sticks in the ground next to cardboard protectors. Our granddaughters — they were so little then — gave them one teaspoon of fertilizer a month.

"And now I just want to see them give what they are meant to give. Gosh, who doesn't love a pistachio?" he asked, break-

ing off a bud and pulling it back to show a small white pod that would become a nut.

The heat was coming. In the summer, Central Valley temperatures rise well into triple digits. To bring in a crop, the Lujans usually needed 14 acre-feet of water. They had none.

On the back porch, Suzanne served plastic bottles of ice-cold water and took stock. Their truck was paid for and they could let her car go back to the dealer if they had to.

"If only I'd known this drought was coming, I wouldn't have quit my job," said Suzanne, a retired administrator with a health network.

Fred touched her hand.

"No Suzie, it was time. It won't be like this forever."

His hair brushed his collar — something that usually never happened to the former barber. That week his cardiologist had measured his heart rate at over 200 beats per minute.

Fred said he'd been thinking a lot lately about his dad and grandfather.

"Grandpop always said if you didn't treat the earth well enough, she wouldn't give anything back," he said, beginning to sob. "Did I do wrong? I never used to think about water. I'd wash our cars and boats and ..."

Suzanne, whom he met in eighth grade, interrupted in a gentle voice.

"Take a breath, get up and walk around, then come back," she told him.

After he left, she looked out over the trees.

"I think everything is just getting to him. He's not normally like this. This isn't him," she said.

Ethan, their 4-year-old grandson, arrived from next door for a visit. Evan, his overweight Labrador retriever, trotted beside him.

Suzanne bounced a big ball with Ethan against a garage wall.



**FRED LUJAN** gets a visit from his grandson Ethan Giannetto, 4. "That makes your day no matter what," he said. "I guess whatever happens, happens."

The ball rolled into the orchard and Ethan and Evan chased after it.

"That makes your day no matter what," Fred said. "I guess whatever happens, happens."



Survivor died in June.

Not having water during the first heat spell was too much stress for the injured tree. Lujan took it hard. It seemed like a harbinger.

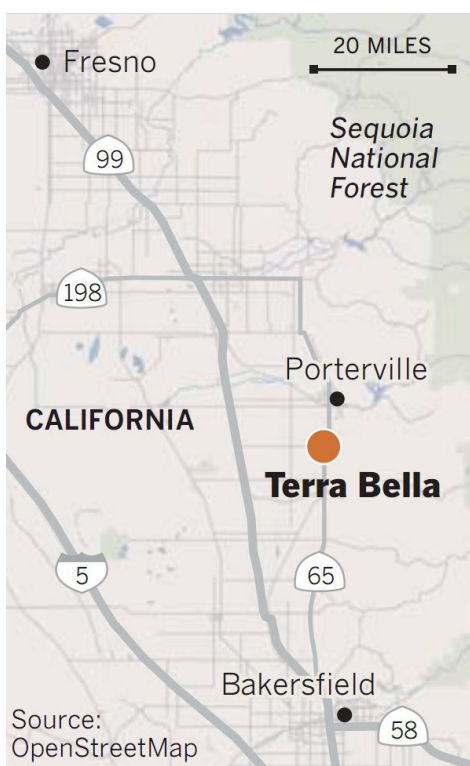
He planned to look for a job the next week, beginning on Tuesday — barber shops are closed on Mondays.

"You can never quit," he said. "I'll beg, borrow or steal to keep my trees alive."

Driving to town, he noticed Setton Farms, which had a pistachio-processing plant in Terra Bella, had planted new trees — about all the way to Bakersfield, it seemed to Lujan.

Back when Lujan still had his barber shop, one of his clients was a life-long farmer, Mike Smith. He had always liked Smith because he had a big laugh and a hard handshake.

Three years ago, Smith started a job as liaison between growers and Setton Farms. Lujan



Source: OpenStreetMap  
**DOUG STEVENS** Los Angeles Times

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decided to talk to him.

“He’s an up-and-up guy. I figured if he can help, he will, and if not, he’ll tell me.”

Smith delivered Lujan’s plea, and Setton Farms agreed to advance the Lujans 10 acre-feet of the emergency water the company had bought, and let them pay for it after harvest.

“I was ecstatic to be able to help Fred. He’s real. Just a very genuine person, and you may have noticed he’s never met a stranger,” Smith said. “But in my heart of hearts, I know this is only a band-aid. What happens next year? What if it doesn’t rain? The small guys can’t hang on.”

In his job, Smith drives from one end of the Central Valley to the other.

“I see the dying trees, the burned-out shrubs. I talk to all the other Freds — there are a lot of them,” he said. “My fear — and it’s a real fear — is that if it doesn’t rain next year, this valley will face a reality that will rival the Great Depression.”

But at the Lujans’, Fred was happy again.

He was back in the orchard, shouting at Evan the dog to stop being naughty and chasing the school bus.

“Mikey, my oldest grandson, just came back from Afghanistan. My trees, my babies, are alive,” he said. “Now, I’m just waiting for it to rain.”

He was sure it would.

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