

## BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



### **CRISJ Building Justice Podcast**

**Season 2, Episode 17 : The Battle for Clean Water in California's Rural Farmworker Communities**

**Moderator: Richard Falcon – United Latinos and Teatro Nagual**

**Guests: Janaki Anagha**

**Please note:** This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact **Richard Falcon at 916-549-3341** directly should you have questions.

### **Music lyrics:**

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

### **ADD CONTENT HERE**

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Is on, and here we go.

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Hello, everyone! Thank you for joining us here. Welcome to Building Justice!

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A, podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race Immigration.

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and Social Justice, otherwise known as CRISJ.

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We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world

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My name is Richard Falcon. I am the lead organizer for United Latinos. United Latinos is a nonprofit organization, focusing on civic engagement, education, environmental justice

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This podcast. Is the Battle for Clean Water in California's Rural Farm Community.

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My guest. Janaki Anagha with the Community Water Center is here with us.

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Janaki, thank you for taking the time to be here with us.

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It has been such an honor getting to know you over the time we have met.

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So, tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you are doing with the Community Water Center

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Sure, and thank you so much for having me on the program, Richard.

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This is a wonderful opportunity to get to speak a little bit more about our work, and again, my name is Janaki Anagha.

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I'm the director of community advocacy at Community Water Center and Community Water Center is a nonprofit organization that acts as a catalyst for community driven water solutions through organizing education and advocacy throughout our State.

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We have offices here in Sacramento, in Watsonville and in Visalia, and folks who are listening may recognize Watsonville, and Visalia as places

that typically deal with some of the most severe water issues both contamination and quantity issues as a result of the

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drought, and my work, specifically as the director of community advocacy is around ensuring that the communities that typically suffer the worst impacts of those contamination and quantity issues are at the forefront of crafting their own solutions around accessing safe and affordable drinking water and

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those are policy solutions. Those are actual infrastructure solutions.

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We actually contract with engineers and hydrologists and ensure that pipes get built to connect people to clean and affordable drinking water and there's sometimes also education and advocacy.

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There locally, as it pertains to their local governance of their drinking water. So, all 3 of those things are in in my wheelhouse at Community Water Center, and I'm excited to talk to you a little bit more about how we go about some of that advocacy

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I have to tell you. When we first met, and you brought forward to me the information specifically in regard to what was happening in East Orosi in Tulare County, I felt so uneducated in this and especially working in the environmental justice field as with focus on air quality

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We don't think about water and water quality and water rights.

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I mean, we turn on our tap and there's the water coming out, and and and and Janaki.

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We've just experienced significant rains in California again.

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So, you know. Tell us a little bit. First of all, let's define.

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Let's define drought first, are we still in a drought?

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Janaki.

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It's a great question, Richard, and honestly, there isn't one clear answer for this, because the definition of drought is so nebulous.

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There are several different definitions of drought, because there are several different types of drought. Right?

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There's a meteorological drought there is hydrologic drought.

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There's a what we could call an agricultural drought there's socioeconomic drought.

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There's different forms of an understanding of what drought is.

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But overall, you know, a drought is understood as a period of abnormally dry weather that is prolonged, due to a lack of water caused by a hydrologic imbalance, and what I'm interested in talking about is what's causing that imbalance and

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Who's suffering from that imbalance that really is the human impact of drought.

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And and so far as we're looking at the human impacts of drought, Richard, we're absolutely still in a drought, in the sense that although we have received an incredible amount of precipitation in the last couple of weeks everybody across the State and across the nation is certainly aware of the amount of

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rainfall that we've had as well as snow pack restoration right?

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And to levels that I mean, it's now January.

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We've already hit what we typically expect to see in terms of snowfall at in April.

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Already having happened now in January, which is wonderful in terms of ensuring that we have sufficient melt of that snow that then gets to fill our reservoirs and enter our agricultural irrigation stream later on in the year.

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Hmm, hmm.

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But the truth is, in the communities where I work. These are small farm worker settlements and historic communities that are scattered across the very rural parts of California, and their lack of access to water is goes way beyond the topography or the hydrology of their area, although those things

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Are certainly important to recognize that they're oftentimes these little farm worker settlements that I'm talking about.

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Sometimes (500) 700-1200people. We're all connected to maybe 1, 2 up to maybe 7 wells.

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That that provide the drinking water source to these people. These communities are certainly suffering.

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Some of the worst impacts of the contamination and quantity issues that I'm talking about.

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But in addition to those hydrologic problems, they're also dealing with the acute historic problem of systemic racism that has kept them out of being able to make the important decisions around their water future and to do things like to drill a deeper well to improve their infrastructure to

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improve their treatment, facility that makes sure that their water that comes out of their tap is up to standard.

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The way that you and I, when we open our tap in Sacramento, we can be sure that our water is up to some specific standards, because we enjoy the privilege of having a large tax base and a relatively responsive government that ensures the public health and safety of the the people living in

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the city, whereas in a lot of these other small communities, although these are folks who are the backbone of our agricultural economy, there are people who are spending 12 to 14 hour days in the field, picking our fruits and vegetables and contributing significantly to society they are of

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course, still left without enjoying the access to the basics of a safe and healthy life.

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Whether that's due to acute racism or overt racism, or a systemic ignorance that is really not of our concern.

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At Community Water Center. What we are more concerned with is dealing with the fallout of of that today and ensuring that we fix that we rectified that situation by making sure that those community members are people who enter decision-making on their local boards, that they're there at the state water board making sure that

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They're telling people who are regulating their water.

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Hey! We have nitrate, we have pesticide byproducts, we have agricultural in our water.

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This needs attention, and they're asking for additional state funding, so that those treatment facilities and their infrastructure can be operated and maintained for an extended period of time, so that they don't fall back into these circumstances right?

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So what I'm describing here is that although we have these scientific definitions of drought, and we have these assigned an awareness of the science around water contamination, and quantity, there's a sociological element to all of this that is sometimes even more important or more relevant when it comes to trying

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To identify solutions, and and that maybe is at the core of what environmental justice is. Right?

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That's absolutely right. That leads me to, I guess a statement that I will make that. You know.

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I have heard from people in the community related to air quality, but I'm going to ask it about water quality, because what I'm hearing you say is, we would all love to believe that water is a clean water is a human right.

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It's not being looked at that way. You mentioned some of the systemic racism that has gone on, and, as you know, over the generations, I remember with my work, with the farm workers, how there were times when many of those workers in that towns that they lived and just in San Jose for example, during the time period

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Of Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta they couldn't drink the waters that were there for their taps.

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How could this be Janaki? I'm not trying to sound ignorant.

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But how are ... how is Community Water Center working to do as you said, with some of the successes you've had in East Oroquieta to finally get some of these regular citizens to the table to say, I am here

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It's a great question, Richard, and this year, in 2023, we are celebrating 10 years of the passage of the human right to water, which was a in the the California Senate send a bill that created that Act.

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It was enacted in 2012, and, as you say, human water is a human right in the State of California under law.

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But are we realizing it? Not exactly. I would have to say that the codification of the human right to water has, though in many ways given the vocabulary to our State agencies and to the general public to recognize this glaring deficiency, that we have in our state right that in

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Despite the fact that we have a regulatory framework that's given to us by what's called the Safe Drinking Water Act.

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This was the act that was passed in 1974, which comprehensively regulates water quality across the United States.

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Each State can pass more protective laws or additional contamination limits that are go above and beyond what the Safe Drinking Water Act prescribes.

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But no state can go below it, and California, luckily, has gone above and beyond.

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In some cases what the United States with the Federal Government has regulated around safe drinking water, but that being said, it's great to have set those contamination limits to know the public health impacts to have done significant studies around drought and drought impacts and to finally, in the state of California have passed the

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Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which regulates groundwater pumping for the first time in the State of California.

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All of that is is fantastic, and some of those are developments which have happened since the passage of the human right to water.

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However, it's still the case that today close to 400 small community water systems still struggle to provide, clean, safe and affordable drinking water to California's.

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Wow!

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That's about a 1 million people in the State of California who still don't have access to clean drinking water.

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And you ask me a simple question of why or how? That's possible.

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Well, a good deal of it still comes down to these issues of government and will political will to move projects forward.

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And these projects look so different in each community, in one place it looks like a remediation project where there's a well that has been decimated.

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That's been polluted to the point of it being useless with passengers, byproducts, so there there has to be remediation, effort, and or a drilling of a new well right in another community.

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Oh!

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It could be that the water table that's the level that water sits at in the aquifer has declined due to climate change in drought, to the point that literally the straw no longer reaches the soda, so to speak, that there's no returning that there's no

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Returning that water back up to a level that could provide that water, provide water to that well, right?

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So that requires lowering the pump of that well, so that requires additional funding, and a project related to to that concern in another community like the community of East Oroquieta, that you're talking about.

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There is a small community that's dealing with an agricultural chemical runoff in their groundwater, and they're situated right next to a community that could theoretically provide them with that treatment. Service.

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If only there was a pipe connecting with communities.



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So, we have to step in and help negotiate that connection, that what we call a consolidation of 2 systems in order to bring a source of clean water to a low income, otherwise disenfranchised community.

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So, I've just described 3 completely different infrastructure projects.

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Wow!

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And all of these require knowledge. Expertise, government will, funding, community participation, education, understanding of climate change, acceptance of systemic racism, and stacking up all of these different variables that that we work with at the center and navigate each and every day in order to get to a day when

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These people in these, in all 3 of these different circumstances, can turn on their tap to clean water, that they can fill up a glass and drink

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Wow! Wow! And many of these points you have made with me as we have partnered together, to try to bring awareness.

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I want to thank you for involving us and bringing the arts as a way to be able to bring awareness and joy to the communities that are suffering.

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It's always seems to me I mean in my time, working in environmental justice.

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The people at the bottom. Associate, economic status class race seem to be the ones that suffer the most.

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As a result of this, and

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We have found, at least as far as United Latinos is concerned, that when we educate the population on this, that part of that education is also helping to feel like they can belong to the solution.

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So talking about East Orosi, and some of the progress you've made there.

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Do they feel like they can like they can belong to part of the solution

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Wow!

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I have to say that. Yes, there are a handful of residents who have been working on this for 17 years to access safe drinking water solution, and when I say that it is bittersweet, because the answer to your question is yes, that they're feel like they're a part of a

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Solution. But who wants to be fighting for nearly 20 years to get access to something that is supposedly a human right in the State of California.

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It's demoralizing after a certain amount of time, and recognizing that these inequities are so pervasive that it requires that level of commitment is in on on my worst days.

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That is the source of a great deal of disillusionment for me.

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But that's where the movement comes in right is that it's the recognition that each of these individual cases is not so solitary that it is instead a part of how we verbalize.

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It, at Community Water Center and with communities is a part of and that we're a part of this river of of time is then that's how we actually timeline the movement with community members.

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When we go into community meetings, of being able to put on a piece of paper.

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Here's when this community water system started here's when maybe the first well was drilled.

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Here's the indigenous community that has historically occupied this place.

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That's kind of like going backwards and then going forwards.

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We look into the future around. What is it gonna take to overcome all of these different blockages that we're dealing with, whether it's governance, whether it's climate change, whether it's a remediation or contamination issue and within within that framework where then able to draw out

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The things from people that give them the spirit to be working for such a long time.

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On some of these solutions. Sometimes it's like in the case of East Oroshi there are literally generations of residents who are still working with us, and a couple of people who have passed away who won't be round to see clean water be delivered to that community their kids and

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Grandkids are with us working on this solution, so all that to say certainly there is a sense that not only that folks can be a part of the solution, but they must be a part of the solution.

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And I think that we try our best to make it as joyful as possible while we recognize that there's a lot of like technicalities around these projects, and also in some cases, you know, we do rely on the arts to make those technical pieces a bit more accessible and and interesting and and I

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Was very happy to have that opportunity to work with you, to do that in in recent months.

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If you want to talk about that a little bit more

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That was a complete joy on our part to do so. We appreciate that what was so fun about that when one of your people at the Community Water Center actually wrote the script that we used, you know, based on La Llorna and the whole history of her on the with you know, and it's tied to water and such and it

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was so wonderful to allow her to empower her voice through that script, and the young actors who came forward to portray that for their community that was our little way of of adding on to what you do to help them feel like they belong to presenting the solution.

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So I thank you for that

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I wanna you. You touched briefly on as we were talking about East Oroshi on some of the history on that.

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And I realize history does take us back. Of course, but sometimes I feel we need to see where we've come from in order to move forward and some of the education you gave me was around Tulare Lake and the indigenous tribes that lived around this lake that was the biggest lake West of

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The Mississippi, you know, for so many years, and and and the number of indigenous tribes that lived around there and then, like you said, on comes Western settlement.

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On comes those trying to to to work the land and digging those wells and taking the water and pushing those indigenous tribes off of their land, so that they could so again that they could use the water for their purposes because they felt entitled to it

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Bringing that forward today, I think, as I talk to people about water rights, that's a hot topic.

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Who owns the water. Janaki

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Who owns the water? Yeah, that is such a complex question.

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And it's a it's a question that the State of California has grappled with.

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You know, since the dawn of the colonial project here, water was in some ways the Hmm.

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Water is, of course, the thing that in many ways has made California what it is right in terms of being.

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This agricultural powerhouse, and in more than a powerhouse, I like to call it a science experiment, because it is kind of like the fever dream of a science fiction author to have created what we have in California to have these massive arteries that carry you know are the blood of our

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Soil water through the State in places where it traditionally shouldn't go I mean, much of California is arid, and and yet we're home to this incredible agricultural production system that pumps out 40 to 50 billion dollars worth of agricultural product every year and when you ask who

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Owns the water, you know, of course, a large chunk of water is held in land, and so the question really becomes, who owns the land right when we talk about water?

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We're typically having to think in our mind of 2 different sorts of water ground water, which is that which is underneath our feet.

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We can't see it normally, and surface water, and that's the stuff that uses when you're driving through the State.

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You see it through our irrigation canals. It's in Rivers, it's in streams, but our groundwater, some of our most valuable water, and that's the water that is typically used for drinking bathing domestic use.

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You know over half of the residents of the San Joaquin Valley utilize groundwater from their basic needs.

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Hmm.

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So in terms of the question of ownership, I'm mostly concerned with who owns groundwater, and unfortunately, they answer there, yeah, well, it's agriculture.

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As you look out across the San Joaquin Valley, and again the San Joaquin Valley being the large agriculturally productive area of the State, spanning between the San Joaquin County all the way down to Kern county.

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Hmm.

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This is, this region is almost entirely private land holding, and you stand and you stand in the top of the Tehachapi and you look out across the valley at this beautiful you know this in incredible site which Steinbeck said.

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You know, creates a pain of pleasure in the pit of your stomach to see the sun go down over it.

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Hmm.

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Well, today, the fact of the matter is you're liable to get shot walking across most of it because it belongs to someone.

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So, when when we're discussing water ownership and access, it's important to recognize who owns a land and who has typically had access to that power and privilege.

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And here in California, it's agriculture, and also an important thing to realize is across the United States over 97% of land is owned by white

people, 97% of land owned by white people just let that sink in for a moment.

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And that's according to the most recent agricultural census.

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And in in California as your driving through the State. I'll just sort of paint a visual for you around the governance of what and domestic water of these small communities that I'm talking about when you're driving from north to South.

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You won't see any signs necessarily just talking about this or telling you that you're passing one boundary to another.

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But you are passing through the small kingdoms of water.

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These are what what we call irrigation districts or public utility districts or community service districts that are.

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They don't have physical boundaries to tell you when you're passing from one to another but that's those are the way that water is governed in in our state through these districts, and oftentimes they don't follow the contours.

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Of our natural watershed, they follow the contours of the landowners who first set foot there, or settled there, and created those districts around where they live, or where they farm, so a lot of what we do at community water center is trying to turn back the clock little by little on

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This history of agricultural development in the State whereby power has been historically concentrated in these little districts in the hands of landholders, and to work during our elections and during our opportunities to conduct policy advocacy and training to get people who are landless or who are

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Farm workers or people who are dealing with those acute contamination quantity issues into those decision, making seats themselves so that they can be people who learn those skills and are making the appropriate decisions for the public health and safety of their community.

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It's a. It's really a historic struggle, and it's something that you know.

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We actually, of course, see as a natural outcome of demographic transition, but in some ways we're kind of pushing it to go a little bit faster by doing what we can to to do.

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Community outreach and education to grow, to do that power.

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What we call power building.

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Hmm, power. Power Building, yeah, I know that's so important by empowering our communities.

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By teaching our communities so that they can learn to to advocate for themselves.

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But how wonderful that that frankly, that we have you all at the Community Water center to help us through that!

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It just sounds like tremendous work. I'm let me take just a step in a different direction and gonna ask this question, because it's strikes me.

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You know I mentioned about how we in Sacramento and you mentioned, we have that privilege of opening our taps and getting at least water that from what we're being told is okay to drink you know, this kind of things like that.

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But but yeah, but that's the rural community.

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Janaki. That's that's the ag committees down that way.

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There that would never happen here in Sacramento.

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What would be your response to somebody saying that?

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But we would never suffer those contamination issues

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Correct. Correct. Yeah.

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Well, you know I can't say that I completely would disagree, because in Sacramento I mean, of course, we have to contend with what's what is undoubtedly down the line in terms of scarcity. Right?

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And like, we will at some point reach the place where we just don't have the groundwater stores.

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We just don't have enough clean water to support the population here, but as of right now, I mean, I think within our lifetimes.

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I highly doubt that the people in large municipalities, such as our own, are really going to be suffering with the impacts of drought in the way that these small communities are and that's for for a couple of reasons one is that we are a large tax base you know, our large

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Municipalities are places where we have significant amount of people who are significantly wealthy, and we have relatively capable, you know, engineers and public health office that oversees the assurance of the delivery of safe and affordable drinking water to Us.

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And that's something that yeah, we sort of take for granted.

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And most most importantly, our drinking water sources are not purely groundwater here in Sacramento we enjoy surface water as well, which is, you know, purchased a lot of our water comes from the Colorado River out here in Sacramento, and a lot of our our Big

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Cities receive surface water through those through contracts obtaining water through those surface water channels.

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Oh!

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The community is like East Oroshi. Their drinking water source is just a glorified straw in the ground, going down 50 feet.

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So when that water dries up, which happens relatively frequently, or it gets contaminated, they are suffering with the consequences.

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In an acute way that we in Sacramento will take us a lot much longer time for us to feel those impacts in the same way

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Wow! Thank you for that. Yeah, I think that's a point that we have to remember here.

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So that you know, because

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We all have to, whether it's happening here or not.

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We need to continue to advocate for those that are suffering.

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I mean, you talked about the impact of water scarcity and the contamination because of it.

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We talked about how these committees are suffering, and some of the history related to that.

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What can we do? What can the people that are listening to this Podcast?

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Do to help with the with this battle Janaki?

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Yeah, so thanks. Thanks for the question, I think developing solidarity with farm worker can communities and rural communities is critical to the environmental.

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Justice movement. It's critical to the environmental movement as a whole.

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I think that we won't see climate solutions unless we partner with the people who are at the bottom of our of our system.

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You know, that's to me is something that I try to remember on an everyday basis that our futures are bound up all, although we may not suffer the same exact consequences on the same timeline.

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You know the the realities of rural California impact us because that's the source of our food fuel and fiber.

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That's it's also the backbone of our Ag.

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Economy, here in California. So I mean on a fundamental level, we have to recognize that our futures are bound up right in terms of what we can do.

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Of course, supporting organizations that are doing this kind of direct relief work, which is Community Water Center, but also self-help enterprises, an excellent organization that actually does the immediate

drought relief work in the sense that they work with the state and local offices of emergency

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Services to ensure that when people run out of water that they get bottled drinking water in the interim, and or can get like a tank of water to use installed in their yard, and you know I guess the the really big one of course is education, of yourself and your friends family and community

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Around the impacts of climate change and to become involves especially being here in Sacramento.

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So close to so many important decisions being made around our water future, but also our climate future, as we, you know, educate ourselves to become members of civil society, to take it upon ourselves to recognize that all of these parts of the environmental movement are deeply, connected and we see kind of the drop in our

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Aquifer. And this drought impacts as being one of the most acute impacts of climate change.

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But there! It's so So connected to the movements around Air.

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Quality, fossil fuel extraction around, you know, around food security and the way we farm.

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These are really interconnected movements. So, raising that awareness within oneself and and within the work that you're doing through connecting with organizations such as our own is really critical to the future of our collective success

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Thank you for that. You're right. It is awareness.

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It is education. And just thank, thank the universe for people like yourself and and the Community Water Center for the good work that you do.

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Is there anything in closing Janaki that you would like to bring forward to the listeners here

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I guess I'd just like to reiterate that, despite the fact that we've had this incredible precipitation event in the last few weeks, that it the communities that I'm referring to in the San Joaquin Valley that are kind of in the cracks and crevices of this big

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Aggregate experiment. These folks will still be drawing up sand from their wells in spring. Right?

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I mean, it's not like the rain that has fallen is going to magically recharge these local aquifers.

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So just to the thing I'd like to just say in closing, is just that we, as Californian's, have a real responsibility to keep the long term vision in mind, and to learn to live with these impacts of climate change while ensuring that the people who are dealing with the impacts

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First and worse have the resources that they need to both adapt and and not only survive but thrive in their communities

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Right.

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I would agree. I they can no longer be invisible, because I think to so many of us, they are invisible because we don't see them and you've painted such pictures of a situation that hopefully will keep that awareness going so that we remember what is going on here within our own state not too, far away from

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Where we are now. So thank you again for that, and I want to thank all of you for listening.

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We hope our ongoing conversations, spark understanding empathies, and motivation, to join the struggle for a better future for all

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You just listen to the building justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast.

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## **Outro Music Lyrics**

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.