Bonnie Carr, hands showing at left, Julia Cortez and Juanita Ramirez, right, sort oranges at a packing plant in Orange Cove. California grows 80 percent of the nation's eating oranges. Much of that fruit — about 1.5 million 75-pound boxes — passes through this town's nine plants.

River feeds the land that helps feed a nation

From crops that have grown for years to growth that will come in years ahead, it all comes down to the water

Editor's note: On maps of California, the San Joaquin River flows down from the Sierra Nevada through much of the Central Valley. In reality, almost all the water is channeled north and south from Friant Dam, feeding some of the nation's most productive farmland. Many growing towns also owe their existence — and their future — to the diverted water. And now thirsty new rivals are eying the same flows.

By JULIANA BARBASSA
The Associated Press

Workers' hands plunge into the swiftly flowing stream, sorting out fruit with blemishes as conveyor belts shuttle thousands of oranges around the room, dividing them by size, packing

San Joaquin River

Area enlarged