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 them into crates. Outside the packing plant, lush green groves cover the surrounding hills, as far as the eye can see.

California grows 80 percent of the nation’s eating oranges. Much of that fruit — about 15 million 75-pound boxes — passes through the town’s nine plants. When the wind hits you right in Orange Cove, the tangy smell of fresh citrus is so strong you can almost taste it.

But while the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada frame the sky, there’s little natural water here, explains Harvey Bailey, who works 1,100 acres of oranges and lemons with his brother Lee Bailey. His fruit trees — like Orange Cove’s 9,255 residents — are sustained by water diverted from the San Joaquin River, 50 miles to the north.

“All investment, all our growth, depends on water — not just ag."

— Victor Lopez
Mayor of Orange Cove

30 years, helped bring the packing plants to town, creating many reliable jobs. Now he’s trying to diversify — he went to China to pitch Mexican food made in Orange Cove, and is talking to Koreans about establishing a computer-parts assembly plant.

“All investment, all our growth, depends on water — not just ag,” he said, standing in the town’s brand new development and job training center.

“Any business that’s thinking about coming here, that’s the first thing they want to know: do you have water. It’s our livelihood, it’s everything.”

Downstream of the 3,000-foot-wide dam, there’s just enough water to run for 37 miles. Fish from a state-run hatchery attract herons, egrets and grebes, and Fresno residents come to cool down in the high heat of summer.

But now even this shallow stream has new demands on it — a developer plans to replace orchards on the riverbank with a new housing complex, the first 180 homes of a 1,646-home subdivision that is expected to grow into the new city of Rio Mesa, population 100,000.

Water for the new homes would come from the San Joaquin, courtesy of decades-old contracts originally given by the Bureau of Reclamation to nearby farmers who had relied on the river to irrigate their fields. Opponents say the contracts were intended for riverside farms, not lawns and car washes. But attorney Tim Jones, representing River Ranch Estates, says it’s a case of some water users — environmentalists and farmers — wanting to limit access to another user — his client.

Such battles seem inevitable in the years ahead — demographers predict the Central Valley’s 5.5 million population will more than double to 12 million or more by 2040, as California’s population grows from 36.5 million to a 51.5 million.

Water is the only thing keeping more farmland from going way to houses and golf courses.

“We have a lot of people wanting to build,” said Bob Waterston, the Fresno County Supervisor who oversees the foothills around Friant Dam. “But the first question is, do you have the water? If they can’t show the water, you can’t let them develop. You’re setting yourself up for disaster.”