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# California

## Group accuses water allocators of depriving farm-dependent species

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press



Tony Francois

SACRAMENTO — A group of property-rights lawyers believes federal water officials are favoring salmon and Delta smelt at the expense of nearly a dozen other imperiled species that use farmland as habitat.

The Pacific Legal Foundation says sharp curtailments in federal water south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta are starving protected species such as the California condor, the Southwestern wil-

low fly catcher and the San Joaquin kit fox. The species are often attracted to farms enrolled in federal conservation programs. Those tracts and other critical habitat have suffered because of a lack of Central Valley Project water, said Ashley Indrieri, the PLF's community outreach coordinator.

The group is embarking on a public awareness campaign with the hope of finding land-

owners with the legal standing to challenge the federal water delivery policies in court, she said.

"Farmers may be affected by this if they manage part of their farm for wildlife conservation," said Tony Francois, a PLF senior staff attorney.

"These water cutbacks affect their food resources," he said of the species. "There's a wide variety of people with different types of interests we'd be happy to hear from."

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation spokesman Todd Plain countered that the drought,

now in its fifth year, has made it more difficult to weigh competing priorities.

"Very difficult decisions have been and continue to be made," Plain told the Capital Press in an email. "We will continue to work with other agencies, our water users and interested stakeholders to try to make the best use of our resources."

This isn't the first time growers' advocates have used an environmental argument to get more water for their farms. Rice industry leaders in Northern California have

reminded allocators that their fields contribute to valuable wetlands for Pacific Flyway waterfowl and shorebirds.

About 57 percent of wetlands in the Sacramento Valley rely on rice drain water and about 60 percent of the food for wintering waterfowl comes from rice fields, the California Rice Commission has said.

Among the other species the PLF is citing are the Buena Vista Lake shrew, the California red-legged frog, the California tiger salamander, vernal pool tadpole shrimp and two

species of fairy shrimp.

Francois and Indrieri said they don't know how many growers enduring water cutbacks south of the Delta have habitat for these species on their farms, but they're trying to learn that through their public outreach campaign.

The PLF's attorneys plan to appear as guests on TV and radio shows, write opinion pieces, make speeches at forums and educational programs and widely distribute literature that details the environmental consequences of the water cutbacks.

## Statewide strawberry production poised for record despite slow start

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

WATSONVILLE, Calif. — After starting way behind because of last winter's rains, California strawberry production in 2016 is poised to set its first record in volume in three years.

As of Nov. 26, the state's strawberry pickers had filled just over 194 million flats, surpassing the full-year totals in 2015 (190 million) and 2014 (192 million), according to the California Strawberry Commission.

Production is now likely to vault over the nearly 194.8 million flats produced in 2013, when growers enjoyed their seventh record-breaking season in the previous eight years.

"Basically, the production numbers are determined by the weather, the acreage planted, and the increase in acreage planted in higher volume-producing varieties," commission spokeswoman Carolyn O'Donnell said.

Winter rains early in 2016 put production well behind the previous two years, when a lack of rainfall led to fast starts. As of April 4, strawberry fields in California had produced just 2.6 million flats, well below last year's total to date of nearly 45.4 million. Each flat weighs about 12 pounds.

But this year's production had caught up by early October and kept booming, even as many areas of coastal Cali-

fornia received above-average rainfall. Since Oct. 1, Salinas has recorded 2.56 inches of rain, above its average 1.98 inches, and Santa Maria has seen 2.58 inches this water year compared to its normal 1.93 inches, according to the National Weather Service.

Partly driving the late surge has been an increase in summer plantings for fall production, from 3,719 acres in 2012 to 6,721 acres this year, the commission reported.

Big consumer demand late in the year prompted more growers to plant in the summer, O'Donnell said of the acreage increase.

And while overall acreage has dropped to 36,039 this year from 40,816 in 2013, new higher-yielding varieties have enabled growers to keep pace, she said. Among those new varieties is the University of California-Davis created

Monterey, whose acreage has ballooned from 1,110 to 7,761 in the last five years, according to the commission.

Whether — and by how much — production sets a record will depend on December growing conditions.

The Oxnard area, where much of the winter production occurs, is expecting temperatures in the 60s and only a couple days of rain in December, according to AccuWeather's long-range forecast.

Strawberries are a year-round fruit in California as harvests essentially follow the sun, beginning in Southern California and moving north as the year progresses.

The peak season is in the spring and early summer, when all three of California's most prominent growing regions — around Watsonville, Santa Maria and Oxnard — are shipping berries.

## Navel orange harvest yields good fruit size and flavor

By **TIM HEARDEN**  
Capital Press



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Navel orange growers in California's San Joaquin Valley are about six weeks into their harvest of a lighter crop than last year but are reporting good size and flavor.

Nighttime temperatures have been low enough to bring out color in the fruit, but cloud cover and occasional rain have kept the nights warm enough to avoid threats of frost, said Alyssa Houtby, public affairs director for the Exeter-based California Citrus Mutual.

"By all accounts, the harvest is proceeding well," Houtby said. "They're starting to see a little bit of a smaller crop, but the fruit quality is better than last year and the size is a little bit bigger."

"I think the industry overall is excited to see a better-eating piece of fruit this early in the season," she said.

Growers are expecting an 81 million-carton navel crop, down from the 88 million cartons weighing 1.76 million tons that came out of groves in a weather-bolstered 2015-2016 season, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service office in Sacramento.

The fact that this year's crop is significantly smaller isn't a surprise considering the abundance of last season's production, industry insiders say.

Consumer demand for navels usually picks up around

Christmas, although people have shown more of a willingness to try early-season navels now that the industry can guarantee a certain level of sweetness, Houtby said.

Growers use the state Department of Food and Agriculture's Standard Scale, which was established several years ago and measures a navel orange's readiness based largely on brix, a measure of sugar content. The previous standard was based on a sugar-to-acid ratio.

The industry is upbeat over a wetter-than-average start to the rainy season in the valley. As of Nov. 29, Fresno had received more than 2 inches of rain since Oct. 1 and 11.14 inches for the calendar year, above its averages of 1.62

inches and 9.65 inches, respectively, according to the National Weather Service.

Ample rainfall helps navel oranges develop size.

"Nobody is packing the smaller fruit right now," Houtby said. "That's a good sign."

The navel harvest typically runs from mid-autumn until the following summer. At this time of year, pickers usually focus on blocks with larger fruit and leave smaller oranges on trees to continue to grow, as smaller fruit often must be discounted to move it out.

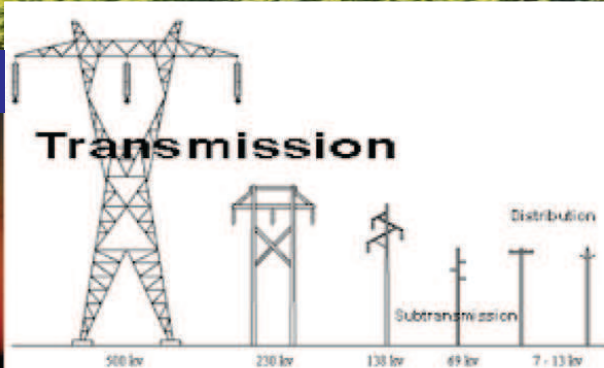
As such, utilization — the percentage of fruit that can be sold as fresh and not diverted to juice — is usually high in the early months and tends to drop as the season progresses.

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