

Faltering Oroville Dam puts region's \$1.5B ag industry at risk

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

CHICO, Calif. — A large portion of the Eastern Sacramento Valley's \$1.5 billion agriculture industry is directly in the path of potential flood waters from Lake Oroville if the dam or its spillway were to fail.

The Highway 99 corridor between Chico and Yuba City is dominated by rice, nut and tree fruit crops, including almonds, walnuts, peaches and prunes, said Louie Mendoza, Butte County's agricultural commissioner.

In addition to farms, several major processors are in the area, including Pacific Coast Producers' fruit processing plant in Oroville and several dehydrators along Highway 70 south of town, Mendoza said.

"If the spillway was to go, we could have a tremendous amount of water," he said. "There would be substantial damage to agriculture if that were to happen."

The potential for major damage to their operations loomed as area growers were among the roughly 188,000 people from Butte, Yuba and Sutter counties who were told to evacuate Feb. 12. Neither Mendoza nor other local or state officials could say how many farms were affected by the evacuation order.

About one-third of Butte County's \$773 million agriculture industry is within the affected corridor, Mendoza said. Likewise, significant portions of Sutter County's \$544 million ag industry and Yuba County's nearly \$232 million industry may be at risk.

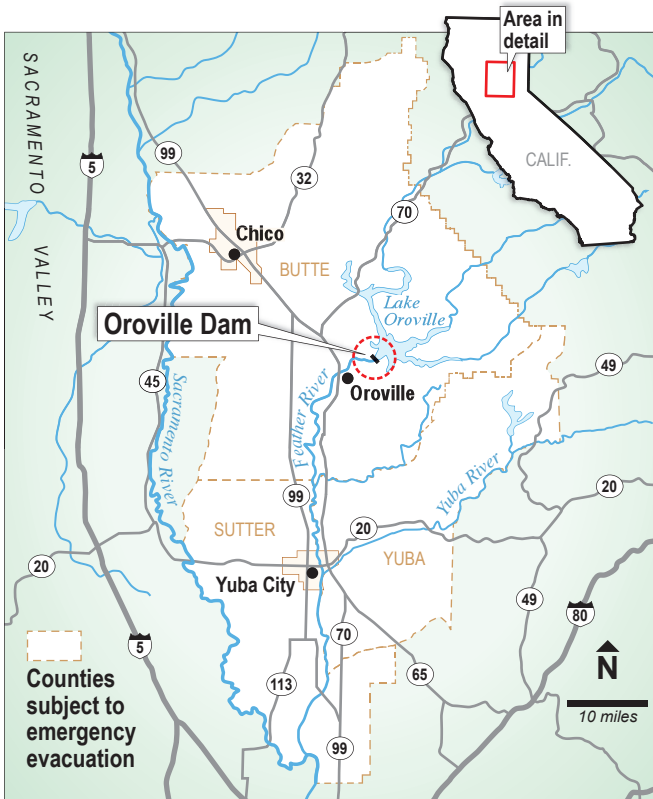
As it was, some fruit and nut orchards planted inside levees were likely flooded as Feather River waters rose, said Lisa Herbert, Sutter County's agricultural commissioner. That's a normal occurrence that trees can withstand, although young plantings could have difficulties, she said.

Herbert had not received any damage reports from



Courtesy California Department of Water Resources

Water from the Oroville Dam auxiliary spillway flows toward the diversion pool on the Feather River on Feb. 12. Some of California's most valuable almond, walnut, peach and prune crops as well as several processors sit in the path of potential flood waters from Lake Oroville.



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

farms as of Feb. 13. She said some growers likely moved equipment to higher ground and secured facilities before leaving.

"We've had water in fields before," Mendoza said. "At this point, one of the concerns right now is that almonds are beginning to bloom and the

trees are starting to grow. If we have continued flooding in orchards with almonds, there's a chance it could damage the trees and drown them out, basically."

A further complication with almond blossom is that thousands of bee boxes are in the orchards. Those are often

placed on the ground, although Mendoza said many beekeepers anticipating flooded fields put them on stands.

Herbert's office warned area beekeepers about a week ago that high water would be coming and that they should remove hives from flood zones, she said.

"Most of our almond crops are located on the outskirts of the Sutter Buttes ... which is a little bit higher," she said.

However, Colleen Cecil, the Butte County Farm Bureau's manager, said she has seen bee boxes sitting in water, "which isn't ideal," she said.

"I'm sure landowners are doing everything they can to mitigate those instances," Cecil said.

Several area fairgrounds were being used as shelters for displaced residents, and a large animal shelter was set up at the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds in Chico.

The evacuation order came after engineers spotted a hole on the concrete lip of the secondary spillway for the 770-foot-tall Oroville Dam and told authorities that it could fail. Crews later used trucks and helicopters to move large rocks and gravel to fill in erosion on the emergency

spillway.

Evacuations remained in effect as of nightfall on Feb. 13, although Butte County Sheriff Corey Honea told reporters he is "working on a repopulation plan" to allow people to return when the state Department of Water Resources and other agencies determine it's safe.

The DWR was releasing 100,000 cubic feet per second from the Oroville Dam's main spillway to draw the lake down as much as possible before another big storm was set to arrive on Feb. 15.

The same thing was happening at Shasta Dam, which boosted releases to 79,000 cubic feet per second on Feb. 13 and raised flooding concerns for residents and farms along the Sacramento River. In Tehama, Calif., the river was forecast to rise nearly 3 feet above flood stage early Feb. 14, said former Tehama County supervisor Ron Warner.

Almond and walnut growers have received permission to use fungicides even in standing water, said Rick Buchner, a University of California Cooperative Extension farm adviser in Red Bluff, Calif.

Lake Oroville is the centerpiece of the State Water Project, which has already raised its projected allocations to at least 60 percent of requested supplies. DWR spokesman Ted Thomas said he doesn't know whether damage to the Oroville Dam could affect surface water deliveries this summer.

"People are working very hard to deal with the challenges that we have," said acting DWR director Bill Croyle, adding a team that includes several government agencies and private contractors are working to shore up the dam.

Croyle also said during a news conference he had been unaware of reported warnings about the emergency spillway's weakness from environmental groups in 2005 during the dam's relicensing process, but that officials will examine what went wrong once the crisis is over.

Bill would do away with dyed fuel in Idaho

By **SEAN ELLIS**
Capital Press

BOISE — A bill that would eliminate dyed fuel in Idaho and require farmers and others who now use it to pay the taxes on diesel fuel upfront and apply for a refund has been introduced in the Idaho Legislature.

The idea has been adamantly opposed by the state's main farm groups in the past, and many of them have policy opposing the taxing of dyed fuel, which is exempt from state and federal fuel taxes because it's only for use in off-road, unlicensed vehicles.

Idaho Grain Producers Association Executive Director Stacey Katseanes Satterlee said her group would oppose the legislation, which is in the Senate Transportation Committee and awaiting a public hearing.

"We think the state's dyed fuel program is important for agriculture and we want to see that program retained," she said.

Diesel fuel in Idaho is taxed at a rate of 32 cents per gallon at the state level and 24.4 cents per gallon at the federal level.

People in industries such as agriculture, construction, mining and logging that purchase dyed fuel don't pay those taxes because their vehicles aren't used on public roads.

Senate Bill 1052 would do away with dyed fuel in Idaho, keeping only clear diesel fuel in the marketplace for all users, but those who are eligible could apply for a refund on a monthly or annual basis.

State estimates of the amount of dyed fuel used illegally in Idaho range from \$3 million to \$15 million.

There is no dyed fuel enforcement program in Idaho and efforts to create one have failed over the years, said Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, who is carrying the bill in the Senate.

The problem with Idaho's dyed fuel program "is that it doesn't get enforced," he said.

The bill was crafted by Jerry Deckard, a lobbyist who represents the Ada County Highway District and the Associated Logging Contractors of Idaho. He did not return phone calls seeking comment for this story.

"I do like the bill as an alternative to the issues we're going through with how to regulate dyed fuel," said Winder.

The legislation would still accommodate those who are eligible to not pay taxes on diesel fuel, he said.

"It doesn't cost them any more money," he said. "They just have to submit an application to receive the money back."

A separate bill introduced by Sen. Bert Brackett, a Republican rancher from Rogerson, would create a basic dyed fuel enforcement program in Idaho that would allow certain law enforcement officials as well as weigh stations to check vehicles to see if they are using dyed fuel illegally. That bill is also awaiting a hearing in the Senate Transportation Committee, which Brackett chairs.

Satterlee said Brackett's Senate Bill 1072 addresses most of the concerns farm groups have with a dyed fuel enforcement program and IGPA sees no reason to oppose it.

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