

California rice exported around the world

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

Charley Mathews Jr. grew up in his family's rice fields.

"Like many farm kids, I started to drive a tractor when I was 12, irrigated rice in the summertime, and always participated when I could for planting and harvest," he said.

He grew up near Marysville, Calif., where he still farms.

Mathews grows medium, premium medium and sweet rice. The medium and short grain varieties grown in California have all the characteristics of Japanese rice — soft and sticky — which is perfect for sushi. California is the world's low-cost producer of sushi rice, and it is marketed around the world.

Like most crops, rice faces insect and weed pests, he said.

"Since rice is grown in an aquatic environment under a continuous flood, many aquatic weeds thrive and compete with rice for sunlight and nutrients," he said. "The rest of the weeds are drowned by deep water."

Insects are a minor challenge but require constant monitoring, he said.

Rice, Mathews said, has historically been viewed as a water-intensive crop. It actually uses about as much water as any other row crop.



Courtesy of Brian Baer

Charley Mathews Jr., a rice grower near Marysville, Calif., says California is the world's low-cost producer of sushi rice. Rice is not as labor intensive as other crops and uses only as much water as any other row crop.

Rice is grown in heavy clay and hardpan soils that have an impermeable layer below the root zone that does not allow water to percolate downward.

This soil type would drown trees and other row crops, but is perfect for rice. It does not suffer from salt buildup or any other long-lasting issues.

"I have a rice field that has been in continuous production for almost 80 years," he said. "The yields seem to go up every year."

Rice is not as labor-intensive as many other crops and growing it is highly

mechanized. With expensive machinery to operate, it is important that growers find talented labor who can get the most out of the equipment.

"Rice growers have several challenges," he said. "The ones we face locally have to do with air and water quality, and that fact that we are competing with an encroaching urban population that does not like noise or dust."

Through the efforts of the California Rice Commission, he said, new urban neighbors are beginning to understand the environmental and social value of a rice field.

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