

New cover crop research could shape California groundwater policies

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY, Calif. — New cover crop research released this December may help shape groundwater policies under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, or SGMA, in several San Joaquin Valley counties.

SGMA, passed in 2014, is a legislative package related to how groundwater is managed in California. It affects many aspects of farmers' practices, including how they pump groundwater.

SGMA requires local agencies to form groundwater sustainability agencies, or GSAs, to monitor high- and medium-priority basins. The GSAs then develop groundwater sustainability plans and regulations for their local regions based on information collected through monitoring.

The problem is that the type of monitoring agencies use — typically remote sensing with devices like drones — mis-categorizes cover crop systems. Winter cover crops, researchers say, generally require no irrigation and provide long-term benefits, but on remote



University of California ANR

This almond orchard near Durham in Butte County, Calif., shown in 2017, was one of 10 sites studied to determine soil water content in cover cropped versus non-cover cropped almond orchards and tomato fields from 2016 to 2019.

sensing images cover crops may appear as water-using vegetation for which growers can be penalized.

"Because winter cover crops may appear on remote sensing images as water-using vegetation, the sole use of model-driven data coming from satellites could become a disincentive to the practice (of cover cropping) being used," said Jeff Mitchell, plant sciences professor at the University of California-Davis.

The new research from Mitchell and his team shows that winter cover cropping is beneficial, is not a substantial water user and should be measured differently by GSAs.

The research was conducted from 2016 through 2019 by UC Agriculture and Natural Resources researchers and collaborators. They worked on 10 large sites in Central Valley almond orchards and tomato fields.

The researchers collected data to quantify changes in soil water storage and evapotranspiration, comparing cover-cropped areas to bare fallow areas. The work focused on winter cover crops, grown November to March.

According to Samuel Sandoval-Solis, one of the researchers, winter cover crops are generally not substantial water users.

In a recent presentation to water regulators, growers and other stakeholders, Alyssa DeVincentis, a former UC-Davis Ph.D. student who worked on the project, said it can take years before growers start to accrue noticeable benefits from cover cropping, but she said the practice is worthwhile because "long-term benefits of cover crops can be significant."



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press File

A dispute resolution panel has sided with the U.S. against Canada's efforts to restrict access to its dairy markets. Under the USMCA trade treaty, Canada is required to provide more access for U.S. dairy products.

Panel rules against Canada in U.S. dairy dispute

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

The U.S. has prevailed in its dispute with Canada over access to Canadian markets for U.S. dairy products.

A dispute resolution panel convened under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement found Canada's use of tariff rate quotas (TRQ) to unfairly restrict U.S. dairy products is inconsistent with its USMCA obligations.

The panel agreed with the U.S. that Canada is breaching its commitments by reserving the vast majority of TRQs exclusively for processors, who have little incentive to import U.S. dairy products.

A tariff rate quota applies a preferential rate to a predetermined quantity of imports. Any imports above that quantity are subject to significantly higher tariffs.

With the bulk of TRQ access reserved for processors, only a small amount is left for distributors — and retailers have no access to TRQs, Shawna Morris, vice president for trade with the U.S. Dairy Export Council and National Milk Producers Federation said in an earlier interview with Capital Press.

"It's these latter two groups that we think have

the strongest incentives to actually purchase U.S. dairy products," she said.

The U.S. and Canada negotiated specific market access terms covering a wide variety of dairy products, said Jim Mulhern, president and CEO of National Milk Producers Federation.

"But instead of playing by those mutually agreed upon rules, Canada ignored its commitments. As a result, U.S. dairy farmers and exporters have been unable to make full use of USMCA's benefits," he said.

The office of the U.S. Trade Representative brought the case in May after trying to resolve the matter through consultations with Canadian officials.

"We expect Canada to abide by its commitments so that the American dairy industry can fully access the Canadian markets just as USMCA promised," said Krysta Harding, president and CEO of U.S. Dairy Export Council.

The dairy access case is the first dispute panel proceeding brought under USMCA.

USDEC and NMPF certainly hope and expect that Canada will comply, Morris told Capital Press.

"Flouting the first ruling of USMCA would set a terrible precedent for the integrity of the dispute settlement tool and, certainly, that should be a priority for Canada as well," she said.

That said, USMCA provides a process for leveling compensation measures — retaliatory tariffs — if Canada does not comply, she said.

"The level of compensation would get decided by the panel that heard the case," she said.

Hay expo to help farmers weather shipping problems

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

Like their counterparts in many other ag sectors, hay farmers have been grappling with shipping problems in the past year.

"Hay is a hard thing to get shipped out, especially when it's cheaper and easier for (railroad) lines to ship back empty containers rather than fill them full of hay," said Andrew Eddie, a farmer in Moses Lake, Wash., and president of the Washington State Hay Growers Association.

Eddie also pointed to the "substantial" increase in the cost of shipping hay.

Those and other hot topics will take center stage at the upcoming Northwest Hay Expo, Eddie said. The expo is Jan. 19-20 at the Three Rivers Convention

Center in Kennewick, Wash.

Fertilizer prices and chemical availability are other topics Eddie expects farmers to be thinking about.

"We're not sure when we're going to get product, if we're going to get product or how much we're going to have," he said. "That's kind of a big thing for most growers and supply companies."

If chemicals are delivered late, farmers will have already needed to spray, Eddie said. "It's a little uncertain right now."

Farmers are working to get their supplies early.

"The problem is it's tough to locate, it's tough to get stuff and then suppliers don't really have the means to get it here any earlier," Eddie said. "So it's kind of just a sit-and-wait game and maybe push off a spray or fertilizer until after first cut-

ting, if you can manage to do that."

Growers should still be doing as much as they can business-wise while still breaking even, Eddie said.

Eddie said he's optimistic about the outlook for hay demand. Domestically, the need is solid. Exports are slow but many exporters are still purchasing crop, he said.

"You just have to make sure that with an increased cost, you're getting what you need out of it," he said.

"You've got to run your business like a business," he said. "Pay attention to what goes in and pay attention to what comes out."

Hay prices are about \$200 to \$250 a ton for big bales of alfalfa, and small bales were \$200 to \$280 a ton, Eddie estimated.

"Demand was very high,"

he said. "Even when you said, 'Hey, here's the price,' (customers) were like, 'Oh, well, that's what we've got to pay, that's the market, here you go.'"

Eddie expects the industry to be watching for new regulations and overtime rules in 2022.

"Stick with what you know, weather the storm and we'll all try to make it through until things hopefully kind of subside, get back to where they were," he said. "Crop prices are going to be a little higher ... while input costs are higher, everything else is costing more. We'll weather through it and see what happens."

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