

Waterfowl latest casualty of Calif. drought

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Add another casualty to California's prolonged and punishing drought: Wildlife officials warned this week that dry conditions in the state's Central Valley could have a devastating effect on North American waterfowl.

The Central Valley is recognized as the most important resting and wintering ground on the Pacific Flyway, a global migratory path for millions of ducks, geese and other birds. About 5 million waterfowl spend the winter on state and federal wildlife refuge areas and flooded rice fields in the Central Valley each winter.

This year, the worst drought in a generation means those Central Valley habitats have been dramatically reduced in size. Wildlife refuges have had their state and federal water supplies cut by 25 percent. Rice acreage has been reduced by a similar amount as farmers also have endured water cutbacks.

As a result, millions of migrating birds will be crowded into less habitat, significantly increasing the odds of botulism outbreaks, which spread rapidly and can kill thousands of birds in a matter of days. The problem is not limited to rural areas but can affect waterfowl drawn to urban water bodies as well. Officials also are concerned the drought could cause food shortages.

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