

Drought takes bite out of Calif. rice harvest

By Terence Chea, AP

California's deepening drought is shrinking its rice harvest, and that's bad news for farmers, migratory birds and sushi lovers.

The \$5 billion industry exports rice to more than 100 countries and specializes in premium grains used in risotto, paella and sushi. Nearly all U.S. sushi restaurants use medium-grain rice grown in the Sacramento Valley.

The rice harvest is just the latest victim of California's historic drought, which has sharply reduced crop production as it enters its fourth year. With 95 percent of the state in "severe" to "exceptional" drought, farmers are leaving fields unplanted, cattle ranchers are reducing herds and almond growers are tearing out orchards.

California, the nation's second largest rice-growing state after Arkansas, usually produces more than five million pounds of rice and sells about half of it abroad.

But this year rice farmers only planted 420,000 acres – 25 percent less than last year – because of water restrictions, according to the California Rice Commission.

On a clear October day, farmer Mike DeWit watched as a giant combine harvester cut and threshed a field of rice plants, discharging the grain into a tractor-pulled wagon.

DeWit, who usually plants 1,000 acres of rice on his family farm in Woodland, outside Sacramento, said he only planted 700 acres this year because his water supply was cut by 30 percent.

So he idled one of his combine harvesters, and hired one less worker and one less tractor.

“I think it’s the worst as far as the California rice industry is concerned on record,” DeWit said. “One more dry year, and I think the impacts on California rice farmers will be devastating.”

The reduced plantings also impact migratory birds and other wildlife that depend on flooded rice fields as habitat. Every fall, millions of waterfowl fly south from Canada and Alaska to spend their winters in California’s Central Valley.

After the fall harvest, farmers usually cover their fields with water to break down the rice stalks, creating wetlands habitat for millions of ducks and geese that can feed on uncollected grains and other plants.

“It is environmentally a very nice crop to have in the system. It mimics the natural system of a couple hundred years ago, when that area was wetlands,” said Bruce Lindquist, a rice researcher at UC Davis.

In a typical year, rice farms flood 250,000 to 300,000 acres in winter, but this year as few as 50,000 acres may be flooded because of water restrictions, according to the rice commission.

Conservationists are worried that waterfowl and shorebirds will be at greater risk for disease as they crowd together in fewer rice fields and wetlands.

“When you have less rice out there, the impacts are significant for our environment, our economy, for the farms as well,” said Jim Rice, a rice commission spokesman.

This year, conservation groups are renting 14,000 acres from rice farmers and temporarily flooding them, turning the fields into “pop-up wetlands” for birds traveling along the Pacific

Flyway.

The rice commission doesn't track prices, but Taro Arai, who runs eight Japanese restaurants in the Sacramento area, said he paid 8 percent more for rice this year and expects to pay even more next year.

Arai, "chief dreaming officer" of the Mikuni Restaurant Group, is concerned about the reduced supply and rising cost of California sushi rice, but he's reluctant to buy rice from outside the state.

So he's looking into growing and harvesting his own rice as he prepares to open more restaurants in Northern California.

"Sushi rice makes or breaks sushi for every restaurant in California or the United States," Arai said. "I hear the rumors there's a cheaper rice, but you want to eat high-quality California rice."