

Drought squeezes duck hunters – could be bad news for fowl

By Ryan Sabalow, Sacramento Bee

RICHVALE – At 5am on a recent Tuesday in Northern California's rice country, headlamps and pickup lights illuminated a flurry of movement off a turnout along a rural Butte County highway.

A half dozen men tugged on camouflage chest waders, coats and caps, and loaded shotguns and equipment onto waiting ATVs. Around them, a couple of Labrador retrievers bounded around the group with excitement.

Greg Galli, the owner of River Valley Outfitters, directed the flow, readying his clients for a windy morning of duck and goose hunting. Galli would lead the men into rice fields that have been flooded post-harvest, in part to serve as resting ground for the mass migration of birds making their annual winter trek south along the Pacific Flyway. Galli, who leases hunting blinds from Sacramento Valley farmers, has had a busy fall.

"Our day-shoot blinds are doing triple what they normally do," Galli said, "because most people don't have water in their duck clubs."

Largely lost in the statewide discussion about fallowed crops, depleted reservoirs and brown lawns, is the impact of California's drought on hunting. The succession of four dry years has dried up many of the natural marshes and rice fields used by the estimated 55,000 people who hunt waterfowl in California. While the number of duck hunters has stayed relatively steady overall in recent years, some of the state's larger refuges have seen a marked decline in hunter usage.

As land available to hunters shrinks, there's more at stake

than increased competition for access to remaining wetlands. State officials point to implications for the state's rural economy – and ultimately for waterfowl.

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