

Water Limits Bedevil California Farmers

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By Jacob Adelman, staff writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A few years ago, the math seemed simple enough for Bruce Allbright: Plant several hundred acres of pistachio trees, add water when needed, then pick the money from the trees.

Now, drought and water restrictions are exacting a high price on Allbright and other California farmers who must make tough decisions about what to plant or fallow, harvest or plow under, prune or chop down.

"I was hoping to build a nice little pistachio farming operation," said Allbright, who grew cotton and lettuce on his farm in the Fresno County town of Huron before planting the trees. "Right now, it's not as nice as it looked four or five years ago."

In recent years, some farmers have shifted from annually planted fruits and vegetables to more profitable permanent crops such as nuts and grapes.

But with less water, many are struggling to keep the plants alive.

Allbright is among the roughly 4,500 statewide farmers the California Farm Water Coalition said depend on water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, where a judge limited pumping in August to protect the endangered delta smelt.

That ruling came in response to a 2005 lawsuit filed by the Natural Resources Defense Council that claimed the massive pumps used by the State Water Project and federal Central Valley Project were driving the tiny fish to extinction.

"My water manager calls it an impending Armageddon, and I would probably agree with that," said Bob Polito, who grows avocados in Valley Center in San Diego County.

California farmers will likely take 82,000 acres out of cultivation next year if the state receives an average amount of rain and snow this winter, according to a study commissioned by Western Growers, which represents the California and Arizona produce industries.

The economic loss would reach at least \$69 million in farm production, according to the study.

Prices for consumers likely wouldn't change because cuts in supply can be replaced by imports.

But the state's overall agricultural output would be affected, said Chris Scheuring, a lawyer with the California Farm Bureau Federation's natural resources and environmental division.

"The translation is that every Californian is going to see a slightly different set of fruits and vegetables in the supermarket next spring," he said.

For many growers, the water cuts appear to be a replay of the early 1990s, when Congress passed the Central Valley Project Improvement Act. The legislation restricted the amount of water available for irrigation to improve habitat for fish and other wildlife.

Growers were better situated to deal with a sharp cut then because they were more reliant on annual field crops that are planted anew each year. Farmers could sow fewer crops if they knew water would be scarce.

More of the state's agricultural acreage is now dedicated to tree and vine crops, which are more profitable but offer farmers less flexibility in dry years because they can't go without water.

Plantings of almonds, one of the state's primary permanent crops, increased by more than a third to 680,000 acres between 1996 and 2005, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Acres with wine grapes and pistachios — other major permanent crops — also increased by about a third.

Acres with lettuce, meanwhile, grew by less than a fifth over that period, while other annual field crops, such as snap beans, artichokes and garlic, lost acreage.

"The flexibility that was out there was significantly diminished," said David Zoldoske, who leads the International Center for Water Technology at California State University, Fresno. "You can't fallow an almond orchard for a year and not water it. It will be dead."

The water cuts aren't hitting all farmers equally.

In the western San Joaquin Valley, which has no other aboveground water sources, reductions will be considerably more severe, with some farmers losing up to two-thirds of their contracted water allotment.

Growers in Southern California, who are not entirely dependent on water from the delta, will lose less than a third of their expected irrigation supply.

But many of those same growers are also dealing with fallout from the recent wildfires and powerful winds that tore through the region, causing at least \$71 million in agricultural damage in San Diego, Ventura and Riverside counties, according to the California Farm Bureau Federation.

Polito wasn't able to water about 20 percent of his avocado trees last week because ashes had tainted the reservoir he depends on.

Now that his water is running again, he said he would use it all to irrigate his avocado trees and stop watering the less lucrative Valencia orange trees he has been farming since 1968.

"You kind of become attached to them," he said of his orange trees. "You hate to turn the water off and just kill them."