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# Texas Rice Farmers' Livelihoods at Stake in Water Talks

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BAY CITY — From Austin to this city in Southeast Texas, the Colorado River makes six twists and turns before it reaches Mike Burnside's rice farm in Matagorda County. Through a 1,100 mile-long canal system, Burnside floods nearly 1,000 acres of rice fields, which are emerald green in June despite the drought. Like most farmers in the area, however, Burnside is worried about the future. Rice growers harvest two crops each year, but tighter water restrictions could eliminate one of those crops, especially during dry years.

"If we got no second crop, mmm — it's going to be tough," Burnside says. "We're not going to make enough money."

In recent decades, the few hundred rice farmers in Matagorda, Wharton and Colorado counties have never lost one of their two crops due to reductions to their water supply, but that could change next year. If levels in the Highland Lakes, which include two key reservoirs near Austin, **remain this low** on Jan. 1, farmers' water allotments next year will be sharply reduced.

"If conditions don't improve, we will be in a curtailment of irrigation water next year," says James Kowis, chief water strategist for the Lower Colorado River Authority, the state entity that manages much of the water in the Colorado River system. Jan. 1 is the key date in the LCRA's calendar for deciding whether farmers get their full share of water or not.

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Rice farmers and Central Texas cities like Austin depend on the same water supply — namely, the Colorado River and its two major reservoirs near Austin, called Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan. In the decades to come, as the **cities grow and demand more water**, some rice crops are likely to be lost when drought constrains water supplies, in accordance with the terms of a 10-year water management plan for the Highland Lakes **currently being negotiated** by various "stakeholders" in the lakes' water — including cities, farmers, lakeside residents and environmentalists.

"When we take the news of what we're having to settle on back to our farmers, it's close to being a lynch mob," says Ronald Gertson, a Wharton County rice farmer who has served as a key advocate for the farmers in the water talks. "That may be overstating it. We're making considerable sacrifices."

Rice farmers, who worked to tame the Colorado River long before the LCRA came into existence in the 1930s and have substantial sway over the organization as a result, have always been allotted ample water under the LCRA's system. Last year the LCRA's agricultural customers, mainly the rice farmers, used 57 percent of the water allocated from the Highland Lakes reservoirs. That's far more than the hundreds of thousands of residents of Austin combined. The farmers also get it cheaper, too: Austin pays more than 20 times more for the water than the farmers do, although the farmers pay a substantial additional amount for the cost of delivering the water to their fields, often via canals.

In exchange for the cheap rates, the rice farmers agree to allow their water to be "interrupted" — reduced or cut off — in times of severe drought. However, such reductions have never actually happened. (Last year the LCRA began to reduce the amount of water it released out of the Highland Lakes to the farmers for the

first time, but a last-minute downpour bailed them out while the water was making its way downstream, which takes several days.)

This situation — in which farmers use vast amounts of water, cheaply, but have never felt cuts — has frustrated other LCRA customers, like the cities. Even more vocal are the people who live around Lake Travis and Lake Buchanan, the two Highland Lakes reservoirs whose levels are dropping rapidly.

“Are we empathetic [to rice farmers]? Yes,” said Janet Caylor, who owns two marinas on Lake Travis. “However, we just feel that the adaptive piece of this is missing in a huge way and it’s primarily because they have been enabled and entitled” to cheap water.

Texas produces about [7 percent of the nation's rice supply](#), but the crop is by its nature far more water-intensive than just about any other agricultural endeavor. For about 60 days, a farmer will keep a field flooded at 3 or 4 inches deep. This chokes off the weeds and allows the rice stalks to continue to mature. Right now, on fields like Burnside's, the water is about to be shut off, so fields can drain.

After the drain, farmers will harvest around mid-July. The roots of the rice stalks will grow back naturally without seeding, creating a second crop. With a bit of fertilizer and a lot more water, a second, or "ratoon," crop, can be harvested in October. In the fall and wintertime, the rice fields lay fallow, and water birds like geese and ducks migrate there to nest and eat the residual rice. Thus, as the farmers are quick to note, the water on their fields is important for birds as well as rice — a point that environmentalists agree with.

"The water in those rice fields is important to having an adequate amount of waterfowl habitat along the coast," said Myron Hess, who manages Texas water programs for the National Wildlife

Federation. That has meant, Hess said, that there are some "commonalities of interest" between the rice farmers and environmentalists, as the various parties try to hash out an outline for a 10-year L.C.R.A. water management plan. However, Hess added, "It's also true that [water is] a limited resource, and there's a certain amount of competition for that resource as well."

In an acknowledgement of the constraints facing future water supplies, the rice farmers have tentatively agreed to future water reductions in dry years, under the 10-year management plan currently under negotiation. Under the evolving consensus, which still has many more stages before it becomes official policy, the LCRA will use two annual trigger points, rather than one, to determine whether to reduce the amount of water to rice crops. To date, if lake levels fall below 1.4 million acre-feet, or 70 percent full, on Jan. 1, gradual water reductions are supposed to begin. Currently, the lakes contain less than 1.2 million acre-feet of water, but that is moot under the current system because it is now June, not January. Under the proposed new plan, however, another trigger point would be added in June, and the farmers would face reductions sooner.

The farmers, while bracing for pain from this concession and others, note that the water reductions will hurt other businesses that support the farms. Paul Sliva, a rice farmer in Matagorda County, said the effect of planting smaller crops would ripple across the three counties, Matagorda, Wharton and Colorado, where fertilizer, seeding and milling companies are located. "I think they could probably withstand one year, but if we had two years in a row of curtailment I don't know how a lot of these businesses could survive," said Sliva, whose father and grandfather also grew rice.

Many farmers are trying to use less LCRA water. For example,

tractors equipped with lasers now level fields for precision irrigation. Some are also building permanent levees, which will enable them to capture and store rainfall, thus reducing their reliance on LCRA water.

However, for some farmers, particularly those who rent their land rather than own it, such steps can be prohibitively expensive, said Gertson, the Wharton County rice farmer.

"Irrigators are doing it to the extent that they can afford it," he said.

One solution, he said, would be for the LCRA's city customers, like Austin, to devote the money they spend on conservation to rice farmers instead, where their dollars would go farther. "If Austin were to take the money they spend achieving conservation and spend it in the irrigation districts instead, they could achieve conservation approximately five or more times the volume of what they achieve spending it on their own infrastructure," Gertson said.

Highland Lakes representatives have a counter-suggestion — that farmers grow less water-intensive crops. Caylor, who represents Lake Travis in the long-term water negotiations, said that corn or wheat could be possibilities. But farmers say the soils are not as conducive to those types of crops, and they argue water would still be needed for irrigating them. (Historically, before the rice fields spread across Southeast Texas, another water-intensive crop, sugar cane, predominated.)

But rice farmers know that, in the years ahead, they will have less water during times of drought — and indeed they are getting pressure from the state capitol, where state Sen. [Troy Fraser](#), R-Horsehoe Bay, reintroduced a piece of legislation during the special session that would require the LCRA to first reduce water allotments to agriculture users before other water customers like cities are asked to begin water restrictions. However, the

practical effect of this would be minimal, according to Gertson, because of the concessions farmers are already preparing to make for the forthcoming LCRA water management plan.

But the farmers also say they are hoping the LCRA will, in the meantime, find more water sources. The LCRA is working on a plan that identifies a strategy to build off-channel reservoirs downstream.

Until then, rice farmers like GW Franzen, who has been growing long-grain rice in Matagorda County since high school, say they'll keep doing what they're doing, make adjustments and hope for the best.

"It's a calling," Franzen said. "We're producing food for the world."

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