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Water use decision may threaten Texas rice industry

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Associated Press

LISSIE -- Five generations of Ronald Gertson's family have tilled the claylike soil of southeast Texas to grow rice, confident that no matter how fickle Mother Nature was, there would be one constant: water to irrigate their crop.

Until now.

For the first time since Gertson's great-grandfather made his way from Denmark through Kansas to the flat, coastal area south of Houston, his family faces the likelihood officials won't release water from two Austin-area lakes into the rivers and canals they use for irrigation.

Thousands of farmers in Texas' rice-producing region are likely to be affected by action taken in response to one of the most severe droughts in state history. With water management agencies implementing emergency plans never used before, the Lower Colorado River Authority is widely expected to announce March 1 that it will not release water to rice farmers in three counties.

"This is the very first time this has happened," Gertson said. "Rice irrigation was here before LCRA ever existed."

Texas usually produces about 5 percent of the nation's rice. Production also is dropping this year in the other five major rice-growing states, including No. 1 Arkansas, as farmers are pressed by rising production costs and dropping prices.

Gertson said he can grow about a third of his rice with groundwater. If he pushes it, he might get about 45 percent of the acres he normally plants. But he and other farmers are already looking at what they can do to cut costs and make it through what's clearly going to be a hard year.

The three counties unlikely to receive irrigation water -- Wharton, Colorado and Matagorda -- are some of the poorest in the state, with poverty levels above the national average.

Typically, they account for 35 to 45 percent of the 160,000 to 200,000 acres normally dedicated to rice farming in Texas.

Many farmers in the region alternate between growing rice and ranching, but those with cattle sold off much of their livestock last year as the drought parched rangeland and pushed up hay prices.

That leaves them with few alternatives now.

Gertson and thousands of other farmers have started preparing for the worst. They're sifting through insurance papers, trying to figure out how to claim an unprecedented crop failure. They believe insurance will cover 20 percent to 25 percent of their lost sales, about \$1,400 per acre.

But many of their costs will be the same this year as in ones without drought: fuel, monthly loan payments on combines and rent on land they might not even get to farm.

"We've cut back just about everything we can," said Billy Hefner, who has an 1,100-acre rice farm and ranch in Garwood that provides the sole income for him and his two sons.

Hefner can irrigate 90 acres with well water. He might be able to get water for another 400 or so acres because his farm has senior water rights along the river, and LCRA could decide to provide 40 percent to 45 percent of the water farmers with senior rights need.

In the best case, only half of his business will be affected by LCRA's decision, he said.

"Or I could be down to the 90 acres," he added, pulling his baseball cap over his sun weathered face.

Gertson, who has a crop spraying operation along with farming and ranching 8,000 acres with his four brothers, has already told one of his two pilots he won't be needed this year and dropped the \$50,000-a-year insurance policy on one of the two planes.



APPhoto
Ron Gertson stands beside one of his John Deere tractors at his rice farm in Lissie. With Texas in one of the worst droughts in its history, water officials are widely expected to announce March 1 that they won't release irrigation water for thousands of farmers in the state's rice-growing region.

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Normally, the family business would apply fertilizer and pesticides to about 15,000 acres in the area. Instead, it's preparing to cover 3,500.

Determined to keep the flight service's six other employees working, Gertson's family has started preparing pipelines used in underground water wells since the drought has spurred drilling.

They're also doing maintenance and other work usually done in the offseason or that hasn't been gotten to in years.

