

For Immediate Release

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**Rice farmers regret LCRA decision to cut off irrigation water for
2nd year in a row**
Local economy will be hit, though industry will survive

EAST BERNARD, Texas (March 2, 2013) – Rice farmers in the lower Colorado River basin expressed regret today that LCRA was forced by drought to cut off irrigation water to them on March 1 - the 2nd year in a row of water curtailment.

The lack of irrigation water will result in a loss of about 55,000 acres of rice production this year, said Ronald Gertson, chair of the Colorado Water Issues Committee, a group representing rice farmers in three counties. Lost production will likely cause some local businesses to fail, hitting hard the economies of Wharton, Matagorda and Colorado counties.

“We fear real economic and social suffering in our communities that have relied on rice farming for generations,” Gertson said. “The water cutoff will have a ripple effect.”

Still, the rice industry will survive this setback, Gertson said. The local agricultural infrastructure as a whole can absorb the shock, though individual businesses may shutter their operations.

“We hope the pain we are suffering will show interests up and down the Colorado River basin that we need to work together to drought-proof water supplies,” Gertson said.

The LCRA provides water to rice farmers in Wharton, Matagorda and Colorado counties through irrigation systems. Rice production in the three counties accounts for 40 percent of statewide production.

On March 1 the LCRA said it would provide no irrigation water to farmers in the two main irrigation systems this year because the combined water storage in Lakes Travis and Buchanan was below 850,000 acre-feet.

The cutoff of water will hurt waterfowl, too, said Ducks Unlimited.

“Withholding water from rice growers for a second straight year represents another setback for wintering waterfowl and an increasing economic challenge for local economies dependent on agriculture and waterfowl hunting,” said Dr. Todd Merendino, Ducks Unlimited manager of conservation programs.

In January, the Colorado Water Issues Committee expressed support for construction of a reservoir alongside the river to increase the reliability of water supplies for LCRA

customers. At that time the LCRA authorized the purchase of property in Wharton County for a new reservoir.

An off-channel reservoir would benefit the economy, environment and way of life in a nearly a dozen counties along the river, CWIC said in a letter in January.

The water challenges facing rice farming and other irrigated agriculture in the state are fueling requests for lawmakers to protect the agriculture industry as they ponder funding the State Water Plan.

“We urge the Legislature to avoid pitting cities against rural areas as it considers how to fund water projects in the State Plan,” Gertson said.

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The Colorado Water Issues Committee (<http://www.texasricefarming.org/CWIC/index.html>) aims to facilitate the availability of Colorado River water supplies for rice production in the four major irrigation operations on the Colorado River.