

Floods fill some of California's summer strawberry fields

March 16 2023, by Amy Taxin



This photo provided by the California Strawberry Commission shows a flooded Pajaro River area in Pajaro, Calif. on Tuesday, March 14, 2023. California's strawberry farms have been hit hard by this year's winter storms. Industry experts estimate about a fifth of strawberry farms in the Watsonville and Salinas areas have been flooded since a levee ruptured last week and another river overflowed. Credit: California Strawberry Commission via AP

As river water gushed through a broken levee, thousands of people in a

California farming town were forced to evacuate as their homes were flooded and businesses destroyed.

Yet another potential casualty of the powerful rainstorms that drenched coastal California: hundreds of acres of fresh strawberries slated for America's supermarket shelves this summer.

Industry experts estimate about a fifth of [strawberry](#) farms in the Watsonville and Salinas areas have been flooded since the levee ruptured late Friday about 70 miles (110 kilometers) south of San Francisco and another river overflowed. It's too soon to know whether the berry plants can be recovered, but the longer they remain underwater the more challenging it can get, said Jeff Cardinale, a spokesperson for the California Strawberry Commission.

"When the water recedes, what does the field look like—if it is even a field anymore?" Cardinale said. "It could just be a muddy mess where there is nothing left."

For years, California's farmers have been plagued by drought and battles over water as key sources have run dry. But so far this winter, the nation's most populous state—and a key source of food for the nation—has been battered by 11 atmospheric rivers as well as powerful storms fueled by arctic air that produced blizzard conditions in the mountains.

Many communities have been coping with intense rainstorms and flooding, including the unincorporated community of Pajaro, known for its strawberry crop. The nearby Pajaro River swelled with runoff from last week's rains and the levee—built in the 1940s to provide [flood protection](#) and a known risk for decades—ruptured, forcing the evacuation of more than 8,000 people from the largely Latino farmworker community.



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Farmworkers have seen their hours reduced or slashed entirely due to the storms, said Antonio De Loera-Brust, a spokesperson for United Farm Workers. The most critical issue, he said, is helping those in the community of Pajaro rebuild.

The overwhelming majority of U.S.-grown strawberries come from California, with farms in different regions of the state harvesting the berries at distinct times of the year. About a third of the state's

strawberry acreage is in the Watsonville and Salinas areas, according to the commission.

Peter Navarro grows strawberries, raspberries and blackberries on a farm by the Pajaro River. He said he was fortunate his fields weren't flooded by the levee rupture, but still expects his crop to be delayed several weeks due to the rainy, cold weather.

After planting berries last year, Navarro said he and other farmers were concerned about [water sources](#) drying up due to prolonged drought.

"When it started raining, we were elated, happy, saying, 'This is what we need, a rainy season,'" Navarro said. "We certainly were not expecting all these atmospheric rivers. It just overwhelmed us—and overwhelmed the river."

Other crops are also affected by the deluge in the Pajaro Valley, such as lettuce and other greens. Some vegetables had already been planted, but many hadn't, and might see delays in planting due to the storms, said Norm Groot, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau.



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"Right now, I think everyone's out trying to save the farm, so to speak," Groot said, adding more rain was forecast for the weekend.

Monterey County is home to Pajaro and the crop-rich Salinas Valley, and has more than 360,000 farmed acres, said Juan Hidalgo, the county's agricultural commissioner. The county estimates the farm sector was hit by \$324 million in losses from January storms, and strawberries, raspberries and greens will likely be affected by this one, he said.

But, he added, many acres of farmland won't be, and consumers may not feel the impact of the storms. "We're still going to have a lot of production," he said.

A challenge for strawberry growers is the plants are already in the ground. Soren Bjorn, president of Driscoll's of the Americas, said the company works with a network of independent growers to package, ship and sell strawberries. In the Pajaro Valley, farmers did their planting last fall so the berries would hit stores during the summertime when it's too hot to grow the fruits further south, he said.

Right now, farmers can't even access the fields, because roads are covered in water. But with about 900 acres (364 hectares) under water in the Pajaro Valley and another 600 acres (243 hectares) flooded in nearby Salinas, Bjorn said the potential impact is significant, especially as farmers not only face the challenge of mud-soaked plants but also damaged equipment.

In the peak of the summer, Bjorn said most of the strawberries in the country come from this region.

"It's too soon to know the full impact of this," he said. "There is no way we are going to get what we had planned for."

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