

Corporate growers' carrots are soaking up water in this arid valley. Locals are fighting back

November 20 2023, by Ian James, Los Angeles Times



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In the Cuyama Valley north of Santa Barbara, lush green fields stretch across the desert. Sprinklers spray thousands of acres to grow a single

thirsty crop: carrots.

Wells and pumps pull groundwater from as deep as 680 feet, and the aquifer's levels are dropping.

As the valley's only [water](#) source shrinks, a bitter legal battle over water rights has arisen between carrot growers and the community. Residents are fighting back with a campaign urging everyone to stop buying carrots.

Along the valley's roads, in cattle pastures and outside homes and businesses, signs and banners have sprung up declaring "BOYCOTT CARROTS" and "STAND WITH CUYAMA AGAINST CORPORATE GREED."

The signs target two of the world's largest carrot-growing companies, Grimmway Farms and Bolthouse Farms, which are the valley's biggest water users.

The companies stirred outrage when they, along with several other allied entities, sued property owners throughout the valley, asking a court to determine how much water everyone can pump.

The lawsuit, filed in 2021, has left small farmers, ranchers and other property owners with staggering legal bills. Residents have accused the companies of going to court to try to secure as much water as possible, while forcing painful cuts on smaller farms.

"They're all for themselves. It's all about the money," said Chris Wegis, who runs a family farm with her husband. "It's totally disheartening that somebody wants to come in and basically destroy you for their own personal gain."

After many residents rallied around the carrot boycott, Bolthouse Farms and Grimmway Farms recently dropped out of the lawsuit, filing requests to remove themselves as plaintiffs. Other companies that lease farmland to the growers are staying on as plaintiffs and pressing ahead with the case.

Grimmway Farms, the largest carrot grower in the world, said in an email to The Times that the lawsuit was intended to "ensure an equitable allocation of water basin-wide to protect the groundwater rights of all users."

"It has become clear, however, that many do not support the adjudication," the company said. "Our relationships with the residents of Cuyama are more important and valuable to us than this court case."

Both Grimmway and Bolthouse said they are committed to reducing water use and taking part in the valley's groundwater management plan, which the state recently approved.

But residents and small farmers said they remain at odds with the carrot growers and will continue the boycott.

Records show the two carrot companies pumped more than 28,000 acre-feet of water last year, accounting for about 65% of all measured pumping reported to the local groundwater agency. Together, the companies used nearly three times the annual water use of the city of Santa Barbara.

Wegis and her husband, Jim, have been running their family farm since 1979 near lands where his ancestors homesteaded and ranched in the 1800s.

Five years ago, the Wegises stopped growing alfalfa, an especially water-

intensive crop, and planted about 200 acres of olive trees, which require much less water. Chris Wegis said while they have made substantial investments to reduce water use, they have watched the carrot farms expand and drill more wells.

"They have come in and basically—excuse my language—raped our valley," Wegis said. "They are the problem. They are the ones that are not sustainable."

Wegis spoke while picking olives to sample their oil content. She said the carrot growers' tactics put local farms like hers in danger. Their family business is already in debt, and they are fighting to survive, she said.

"Our blood, sweat and tears are in this land," Wegis said. "And for someone to come in and try to rob us of our livelihood and take it from us, for their own profit, it's unrighteous. I mean, it's just criminal."

The conflict in the Cuyama Valley is one of several that have emerged in parts of California where farming communities are grappling with chronic groundwater depletion. Landowners have filed suit in four other similar cases, including in Ventura County and Ridgecrest, seeking court adjudications to determine how much groundwater they should be able to pump.

The cases often take years to reach a judgment.

The lawsuits are complicating California's efforts to implement pumping limits and other requirements of the state's landmark 2014 groundwater law, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

In many areas of California and the Southwest, the depletion of groundwater has been worsening, outpacing efforts to impose regulation

and threatening future water availability at a time when climate change is straining supplies. As aquifers are drained by excessive pumping, water reserves that seeped underground over thousands of years are being used up.

In one recent study, researchers found that California's current plans for addressing overpumping aren't nearly stringent enough, leaving thousands of wells at risk of running dry.

The Cuyama Valley is one of 21 groundwater basins that state officials have deemed "critically overdrafted." The law requires local agencies in these areas to develop plans to halt overpumping and stabilize groundwater levels by 2040.

In the Cuyama Valley, achieving those goals is expected to require slashing water use by as much as two-thirds.

A group of residents launched the carrot boycott at a meeting in July, saying they are fed up with the companies' lawsuit and excessive pumping. Organizers designed signs and bumper stickers, and began handing them out.

"The only way to get their attention is through boycotting their products so that they realize the pain that they're causing," said Charlie Bosma, one of the organizers. He said the goal is to send a message that the community won't let the carrot companies "just destroy this valley."

Bosma grew up in the Cuyama Valley and lives on a cattle ranch, where he uses his well to irrigate fruit trees and grapevines. He works as the high school's athletic director and coaches the football team.

Bosma's legal bills have topped \$11,000.

The local drinking water supplier in New Cuyama, the Cuyama Community Services District, is proposing to cover its legal costs by adding a \$20-a-month surcharge to bills—a costly burden for many low-income residents.

Bosma said it's especially galling that the school district has had to spend \$15,000 so far to defend its interests.

"That's taking money out of what we could put into our kids," Bosma said. "It's gouging our school. It's gouging our water district. It's gouging every landowner in this valley."

The group began circulating an online petition calling for Grimmway and Bolthouse to halt their overpumping, end the lawsuit and reimburse residents for their legal fees.

"For our valley, this is the most important battle that we hopefully will ever face—because of how damaging it could be if we don't get it right," he said.

In recent years, representatives of the Bakersfield-based carrot companies participated as the local groundwater agency developed its plan for reducing pumping.

Grimmway Farms said it's not in favor of cutting the [water rights](#) of the local water district, the high school or small residential water users.

Bolthouse Farms said in an emailed statement that the company's decision to withdraw from the lawsuit was "driven by our commitment to sustainability."

"We at Bolthouse Farms recognize the issue of groundwater depletion and take the matter very seriously," the company said. "We are actively

reducing water usage by 5% for two years and have committed to doing so by approximately 60% by 2040."

One of the remaining plaintiffs is Bolthouse Land Co., a subsidiary of Bolthouse Properties, which split from Bolthouse Farms in 2005 and leases land to the farming company.

Daniel Clifford, vice president and general counsel for Bolthouse Properties, said the litigation will "allow for a collaborative process involving all parties, in conjunction with court oversight" and is intended to help the Cuyama Basin meet the objectives of the state's groundwater law by establishing legally enforceable water allocations.

"The only way the Cuyama Basin will achieve sustainability is if water cutbacks are shared equally among all groundwater users," Clifford said in an email. "The fact that some significant groundwater users were unwilling to agree to a reduction in their groundwater usage necessitated the assistance of the Court."

The [legal fight](#) has been complicated by disputes among agricultural landowners over how the cuts should be apportioned.

Some growers, including Jim and Chris Wegis, have argued the carrot growers created the problem and should deal with it. The Wegises have said water levels are relatively stable in their area, and they point to studies showing a fault separates the aquifer from the central portion of the basin where declines are occurring beneath the carrot farms.

Clifford blamed those who are trying to challenge the basin's boundaries for "driving up the legal fees," and said the solution must be a "basin-wide" approach with everyone shouldering equal cutbacks.

Bosma said the decisions by Grimmway and Bolthouse Farms to pull out

of the lawsuit are a step in the right direction, but not nearly enough.

He said the boycott will continue "until they want to actually come to the table and fix it."

The Cuyama River has been flowing after this year's rains in parts of the valley. But large stretches of the riverbed usually sit parched beside the farmlands.

Water in the Cuyama Valley's aquifer accumulated underground over millennia. A large portion of that ancient water reserve has been depleted by decades of heavy pumping.

Older residents remember seeing wetlands where water once flowed from the aquifer and nourished cottonwood trees. But as water was pumped to irrigate alfalfa and other crops in the 1960s and '70s, some wetlands dried up and cottonwoods died as water levels declined.

Some of the first carrot growers arrived in the 1980s, buying alfalfa fields.

Over the past two decades, the carrot-growing operations have shifted from family-run companies to corporate giants, and have expanded to larger acreages.

As the boycott has grown, those who have joined the effort include farmers who grow pistachios, grapes and other crops.

Tristan Zannon, who manages his family's pistachio farm, said he and many others were surprised when the companies decided on the "nuclear option" of suing.

"I think some accountant decided that it was cheaper to fight through

litigation," Zannon said.

As Zannon walked through his orchard, workers harvested pistachios with machinery, shaking the trees and sending nuts raining down.

Zannon said he has begun looking at areas where trees can be ripped out to reduce water use.

Meanwhile, declining water levels in wells near the carrot farms are bringing higher pumping costs, as well as worsening water quality with higher salinity, Zannon said. "We're scared to death that we won't have water in 10, 15 years."

Zannon said it's wrong that the carrot growers who have caused much of the overdraft problem are positioning themselves to get the largest water allocations.

The adjudication case has opened up a parallel path for fighting over water separate from state-mandated regulation, Zannon said, and the fact that several lawsuits have popped up in just a few years indicates California will probably see more such cases in the courts as scarcity continues to fan conflicts.

"It's a good time to be a water lawyer," Zannon said. "This is the beginning of the water wars."

Nearby, Jean Gaillard and Meg Brown run a small farm where they grow a variety of vegetables, including squash, cucumbers, spinach and onions. They pump a minimal amount of water to supply the farm, but the water level in their well has been dropping about a foot and a half per year.

Gaillard knelt at the edge of his field, where a white crust covered the

ground. He took a pinch in his fingers and brought it to his tongue.

"There's salt in there, and that's never good for farming," Gaillard said.
"That has been worsening over the years."

Standing beside his home, Gaillard looked out over the vast carrot fields.

"They're hurting a lot of people by extracting all the water," he said.
"They are unsustainable."

2023 Los Angeles Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Corporate growers' carrots are soaking up water in this arid valley. Locals are fighting back (2023, November 20) retrieved 21 May 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2023-11-corporate-growers-carrots-arid-valley.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--