

California farm region faces furry new threat: swamp rodents

By SAMANTHA MALDONADO and TERRY CHEA | September 26, 2019

LOS BANOS, Calif. (AP) — One of the most recent threats to California's environment has webbed feet, white whiskers, shaggy fur and orange buck teeth that could be mistaken for carrots.

"Boy, they're an ugly-looking thing," said David Passadori, an almond and walnut grower in central California. "And the way they multiply — jeez."

The swamp rodents, called nutria, are setting off alarms in California. They weigh about 20 pounds each and eat the equivalent of about a fourth of their weight each day by burrowing into riverbanks and chomping into plants that emerge from the water.

The animals can destroy the wetland habitats of rare and endangered species, degrading soil, ruining crops and carrying pathogens that may threaten livestock.

Most of all, they pose a public safety risk: Left unchecked, nutria could jeopardize California's water supply, especially if they get into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The delta is the "heartbeat of California's water infrastructure," according to Peter Tira, spokesman for the state's Department of Fish and Wildlife. It contains a network of more than 1,000 miles of canals and levees that protect the area from flooding, provide drinking water to millions of Californians and irrigate the lush agricultural region.

Now, armed with \$10 million in state funds, the wildlife agency is deploying new tactics to eradicate the nutria and try to prevent the widespread destruction they are known to cause.

"Over the past two years, our best efforts were trying to not even control the population but keep it from exploding while we pursued the resources needed to actually pursue eradication," said Valerie Cook, environmental program manager for Fish and Wildlife's newly established Nutria Eradication Program. "We haven't had nutria in California for 50 years, so nobody really knows much about them," Tira said. "We've had to learn on the job as we go." An invasive species originally from South America and brought to the U.S. at the height of the fur trade in the late 19th century, nutria were believed to have been eradicated in the state in the 1970s until one turned up in a beaver trap in 2017. Since then, more than 700 nutria have been trapped and killed, including four on Passadori's property.



A NUTRIA in Merced County, Calif. With \$10 million in state funding, the Department of Fish and Wildlife is preparing to deploy new tactics in its efforts to eradicate nutria. (California Department of Fish and Wildlife via AP)