California Agriculture Faces Mounting Pressure: Roger Isom Sounds the Alarm on Regulations, Water, and the Future of Farming

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From plastic packaging mandates and water shortages to rodent damage, cotton production, and the upcoming California governor's race, Roger Isom says the future of agriculture depends on the decisions being made today.



Roger Isom
President of the Western Tree Nut Association and California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association

California agriculture is at a crossroads, according to **Roger Isom**, President and CEO of the Western Tree Nut Association (WTNA) and the California Cotton Ginners and Growers Association (CCGGA). During an in-depth conversation with **"The Ag Meter" Nick Papagni**, Isom discussed the growing regulatory burden facing California farmers, a multi-state lawsuit challenging the state's plastic packaging law, water infrastructure, crop outlooks, and why he believes the upcoming gubernatorial election could significantly impact the future of agriculture.

The nearly 50-minute interview covered a wide range of issues affecting growers throughout California and offered listeners a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges producers face every day.

Multi-State Lawsuit Challenges California Packaging Law

The discussion opened with California's controversial single-use plastic packaging regulations, which are now the subject of a federal lawsuit led by Nebraska Attorney General Mike Hilgers and joined by attorneys general from 17 other states, along with agriculture and business organizations.

Isom said California continues to pass laws requiring products sold within the state to comply with California standards—even if those products are manufactured elsewhere. The new law requires major reductions in single-use plastics while increasing recycled content by 2032.

For agriculture, however, packaging is far more complicated than simply replacing plastic with another material.

Fresh produce, nuts, cotton, and other commodities require packaging that meets strict standards for food safety, strength, durability, breathability, and export shipping. Some products, including cotton bale bagging, are required by industry standards to use 100% virgin plastic, creating conflicts with California's recycled-content mandates.

Adding to growers' concerns are new reporting requirements, Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO) fees, and compliance costs that have yet to be fully determined.

Unlike many industries, agriculture cannot simply increase prices to recover those expenses.

"We compete with growers around the world," Isom explained. "If our costs go up because of California regulations, we can't simply charge more for our almonds or cotton."

California Farmers Face Growing Competitive Disadvantages

Isom warned that regulations unique to California continue placing local growers at a disadvantage compared to producers in other states and countries.

He pointed to industries like cherries, grapes, blueberries, and cotton, where packaging requirements could substantially increase costs while competitors outside California continue operating under existing standards.

He believes the lawsuit raises an important constitutional question regarding interstate commerce and whether one state should effectively dictate manufacturing requirements for businesses across the nation.

Water Continues to Dominate Agriculture's Concerns

Water remained one of the interview's central themes.

Despite reservoirs sitting at or above historical averages, Isom questioned why many west-side growers continue receiving only 25 percent water allocations.

While acknowledging that California experienced another relatively dry winter, he argued current allocations fail to reflect available storage and unnecessarily restrict agricultural production.

He also emphasized the importance of expanding long-term storage through projects such as:

- Raising Shasta Dam
- Completing Sites Reservoir
- Raising San Luis Reservoir
- Improving the Delta-Mendota Canal
- Expanding groundwater recharge
- Additional conveyance improvements

Isom praised renewed federal attention toward California water infrastructure, noting that water has become a major priority in conversations involving President Donald Trump and federal agencies.

He believes California must capitalize on this rare opportunity to secure additional water infrastructure investments.

Unified Water Plan Offers New Direction

Another promising development discussed during the interview is the San Joaquin Valley Water Blueprint Unified Water Plan.

The comprehensive draft attempts to bring agricultural organizations, municipalities, water districts, and other stakeholders together under one statewide strategy to address long-term water shortages resulting from SGMA, Delta restrictions, groundwater limitations, and future growth.

Isom described the plan as one of the most significant collaborative water efforts California has undertaken in decades.

Almonds Look Promising While Cotton Faces Challenges

Turning to crop conditions, Isom reported that California's almond crop is running ahead of schedule, with hull split already occurring in many orchards and harvest expected to begin earlier than normal.

While he declined to predict whether production will exceed or fall below the anticipated 2.7-billion-pound crop, he described current conditions as generally favorable.

Pistachios, however, are expected to produce a much lighter crop this season.

The discussion also focused on California cotton.

Although acreage will likely never return to historical highs because of SGMA and water restrictions, Isom believes cotton still has an important role in California crop rotations alongside tomatoes, onions, garlic, and wheat.

He also highlighted USDA efforts promoting "Plants, Not Plastic," encouraging greater use of natural cotton fibers instead of synthetic petroleum-based textiles.

Rodent Damage Creating Millions in Losses

One of the interview's most eye-opening topics involved rodent damage throughout California orchards.

According to Isom, rats and gophers have destroyed irrigation systems by chewing through drip tubing while searching for water.

Even more concerning, rodents have begun stripping bark from trees, permanently damaging branches and dramatically reducing future yields.

Some growers have been forced to replace irrigation systems multiple times, while others have spent tens of thousands of dollars hand-burying drip lines to protect them from rodents.

Combined crop losses and infrastructure repairs now represent hundreds of millions of dollars in damages across California agriculture.

Regulations Continue to Multiply

Beyond packaging laws, Isom outlined numerous additional regulatory proposals currently under consideration, including:

- PFAS pesticide legislation
- Treated seed regulations
- Rodenticide restrictions
- Cal/OSHA irrigation gate safety rules
- Additional Department of Pesticide Regulation proposals

Many of these regulations, he argues, impose significant costs without providing measurable improvements in safety or environmental protection.

California Election Could Shape Agriculture's Future

The conversation frequently returned to California politics.

Isom believes the upcoming gubernatorial election represents one of the most consequential in recent history for agriculture.

While recognizing the political challenges involved, he encouraged Californians to become informed, participate in the election process, and carefully consider how public policy affects farming, food production, energy costs, water infrastructure, and the state's overall economy.

He also emphasized that agriculture supports thousands of jobs beyond the farm—including banking, insurance, education, transportation, equipment sales, food processing, and retail.

Support the Western Tree Nut Association

Listeners interested in learning more or becoming involved with the Western Tree Nut Association can visit:

Western Tree Nut Association (WTNA)

Website: https://www.wtna.org/

The website includes membership applications, contact information, and additional resources for growers and agricultural supporters.