Fruit trees bulldozed, jobs cut amid raging battle over future of Queensland’s Paradise Dam

ABC Wide Bay / By Johanna Marie
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Bundaberg avocado grower Matthew Kingston is calling for Paradise Dam to be restored.

(ABC Wide Bay: Johanna Marie)

Australia’s love affair with avocados should have made Matthew Kingston’s decision to plant thousands of trees on his family property a cash bonanza.

Instead, 10 years on — amid a raging battle over a controversial dam — the Bundaberg grower now regrets his hefty investment.

“No one in their right mind would plant an avocado or macadamia tree anywhere, without any water security,” he said.

Key points:
- Bundaberg irrigators are on 22 per cent water allocations for the 2021–22 financial year
- Avocado growers are bulldozing and pruning trees to save water
- Hundreds have signed up for a class action against the state government

Mr Kingston and other irrigators in the Burnett River scheme have been informed by local water service provider Sunwater that they will only receive 22 per cent of their water allocations for the
2021–22 financial year.

This has forced some growers to remove trees or prune them back to reduce water usage.

Some avocado growers in the Bundaberg region have started bulldozing trees. (ABC Wide Bay: Johanna Marie)

"I don't know anyone who would not be considering it ... most people will run out of their [water] allocation by September," Mr Kingston said.

He has made the difficult decision to lay off staff because of the possibility of not having enough water.

Irrigators had 100 per cent water allocations in the previous financial year, and an average of 90 per cent every year since Paradise Dam, south-west of Bundaberg, was filled in the 2010 floods.
Bundaberg avocado grower Matt Kingston is pruning trees more than normal to reduce water usage. (ABC Wide Bay: Johanna Marie)

However, in 2019, the Queensland government revealed structural and stability issues within the dam’s roller-compacted concrete.

About 100,000 megalitres of water was released into the Burnett River to alleviate pressure on the dam wall and the spillway was lowered by almost 6 metres, reducing its total capacity to 42 per cent.

**Dam decision urged**

The state government is investigating whether the dam can be restored to its full capacity, with a report from the Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water due to be delivered by the end of the year.
Bundaberg Fruit and Vegetable Growers managing director Bree Grima said lower water allocations would mean some farmers would not plant crops, which would have a flow-on impact on employment and the cost of fruit and vegetables.

"It’s not just the farmers and the people [who] are employed directly on the farm [who are impacted] — it’s the truck drivers that are going to pick up the produce, it’s the people making the boxes," Ms Grima said.

"We need that dam reinstated to its full capacity."

**Hundreds sign up for court battle**

Bundaberg lawyer Tom Marland is building a case for a class action against the state government and estimated the economic impact would be in the billions, with up to 700 individual farming enterprises directly affected.

"It’s not just farmers, but all the subsidiary businesses and the Bundaberg economy that’s going to suffer," he said.
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“Productivity losses with the reduction of crops … you’re looking in the hundreds of millions.”

He said the impact on land values would be even more significant, particularly if farmers were removing trees.

"Once you start looking at properties that are losing value as a result of lack of water security, the number extrapolates into the billions."

Mr Marland said there had been delays in filing the legal proceedings, however he expected it would go ahead before the end of the year.

In a statement, Sunwater said the past two years had been some of the driest on record for the region.

"Sunwater is hopeful the rainfall forecast in coming days delivers inflows to water storages in the Bundaberg region, and provides a boost to the announced allocations."

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