

■ FARMING

Chile's 'green gold' blamed for severe water shortages

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WALKING along a cracked earth path in Chile's Petorca province, Catalina Espinoza pointed to a barren hill littered with dried shrubs and cacti – and to a nearby dry waterway.

The city of Petorca, a three-hour drive north of the capital, Santiago, sits in the heart of Chile's booming avocado industry, surrounded by rows of thousands of avocado trees.

Its abundant produce helps make Chile the world's third largest exporter of the popular fruit. But the bounty has come at a price, residents said – the drying of water supplies.

About 70% of fresh water used each year goes to agriculture, said the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Finding ways to reduce farming's share of the world's water, while growing enough food to feed a rising population, will be crucial to preventing worsening hunger in the face of climate change, food experts said.

In Petorca, in Chile's Valparaiso region, locals said the arrival of big



IN PETORCA, in Chile's Valparaiso region, locals say the arrival of big commercial avocado companies more than a decade ago has led to increasingly severe water shortfalls. The situation is fuelling tension. | Reuters African News Agency (ANA)

commercial avocado companies more than a decade ago had led to severe water shortfalls and was fuelling tension.

"People here don't want our avocados to be exported because when they export our fruit, they are exporting our

water," said Espinoza, who lives on the edge of thousands of hectares of avocado orchards watered from reservoirs.

With sources drying as a result of intensifying droughts and avocado irrigation, many villagers rely on water delivered by trucks twice a week.

"People water their avocado plants every day and we have to drink water from trucks that we don't even know is safe," Espinoza said.

Gerardo Orrego, a small-scale farmer of walnuts and olives, said some farmers were forced to abandon the area. "Small farmers cannot survive. There's nothing for people to do. Many families have left."

Global demand for avocados in Europe, the US and China has led to worsening tension between residents and big avocado producers over water rights, including how water is managed and how access to it is regulated.

None of the region's big avocado producers, apart from one local grower, agreed to be interviewed.

Under Chile's 1981 Water Code, water can be owned and traded as a commodity. Individuals and private companies can request water rights that the government allocates. Those granted rights are allowed to extract and use a certain volume of water.

Public Works Vice-Minister Lucas Palacio said water for human

consumption was free and guaranteed under the law. The government was working to improve the region's drinking water system so residents did not need to rely on trucked-in water.

"But this will take time. It will take years" and "it's important to note that the situation in Petorca is extreme" compared to others parts of the country.

Mayor Gustavo Valdenegro said that when the big avocado firms appeared in 2006, the "green gold" they cultivated was seen as a panacea.

"We were going to have a better life and better jobs," he said. "But we had a tremendous drought and from then on conflict between the community and the big companies began."

Daniel Bosch, a big avocado producer, said the region was one of Chile's poorest and the avocado industry brought much-needed economic growth and jobs.

But residents said it was mainly the avocado producers who had grown richer and that many of the jobs were short-term. | Reuters