

## Almonds: Good or bad?

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Reporter

Almonds cover 20,000 acres of Kings County land, but when you drive by the orchards, do you think much about what is required to grow almonds?

A surprising number of consumers do, and it's driving a debate about almonds that has critics levying accusations and the industry — growers included — fighting back.

The backdrop of the debate is severe drought in 2014, which prompted several articles in environmentally oriented publications such as Mother Jones that criticized almonds for the amount of water they use.

Articles started popping up, for example, questioning whether it was responsible to drink almond milk. Other blogs and op-ed pieces raised questions about how much groundwater almonds use and whether that water is essentially being exported overseas to satisfy an international craving for the popular nut.

The criticism was partly timed to coincide with the passage of the state's first-ever comprehensive groundwater sustainability law last year. The law, which will be phased in over a number of years, is an attempt to curb decades of a pump-as-you-please policy.

One of the criticisms levied against almonds is that new orchards are being planted in areas of the San Joaquin Valley that don't have access to surface water, thereby virtually guaranteeing groundwater overdraft even if there weren't a drought.

"There's a lot of chatter among the water specialists," said Matthew Heberger, a senior research associate with the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based water use think tank that emphasizes conservation. "There's been a big acreage increase for almonds and pistachios."

Heberger noted that it will take years for the groundwater law to be phased in. Sustainability plans aren't due until 2020, and agencies charged with implementing the law aren't required to achieve a groundwater/surface water "balance" until 2040.

"It's really, we're talking about after 2020," he said. "Until then, it's whoever's got the biggest pump or the deepest well."

Almonds may be getting a bad rap in some quarters, but the industry can be just as effective at public relations as the critics. The Almond Board of California has launched a defense of almonds on all fronts, touting more efficient water use, funding nutritional studies and supporting research into the economic benefits of almonds.

Recently, the board partially funded a University of California, Davis, study concluding that almonds create 97,000 Central Valley jobs and generate \$11 billion in value-added revenue.

Board representatives are also picking up on the new emphasis on sustainability. The board is offering online training modules to growers emphasizing ecosystem management and social consciousness in the areas of workplace and communities.

Board press releases tout that over the last 20 years, growers have reduced the amount of water they use per pound of almonds by 33 percent by adopting high-efficiency irrigation systems.

“We’re proud that the water we carefully use goes toward producing nourishing food people need, both in the U.S. — our largest market — and abroad,” said Carissa Sauer, Almond Board spokeswoman, in a written statement. “In fact, almonds have a powerful nutrient package which includes six grams of plant-based protein, a fundamental food for many people which is playing an ever-increasing role in government food guidelines.”

“We aim to work with all media outlets covering the current drought to educate reporters about the industry’s efforts to be responsible water stewards,” Sauer said.

Individual almond growers are also defending their crop, arguing that it’s the economic choice that makes the most sense right now.

Almonds are second only to wine grapes for having the highest crop value per unit of water, according to UC Davis researchers.

Compared to corn, almonds don’t use that much water, according to Helen Sullivan, who farms about 350 acres of almond trees south of Armona.

As for the accusation that almonds are a luxury crop, Sullivan isn’t buying it.

“It’s an excellent crop,” she said. “It’s a vital source of nutrition. It’s used a great deal in the U.S.”

Sullivan, like other growers, pays an assessment that goes to fund Almond Board activities. She praised the organization for its efforts to promote almond consumption, both in the U.S. and abroad.

Sullivan thinks the organization, along with the grower co-op Blue Diamond, has done a good job.

“They’re great,” she said. “They’ve done a lot to spread [positive] things around.”

Sullivan said one of the reasons she planted almonds are their price stability and consistent profitability. She sought to remind people that the choice to plant almonds is a business decision, no different from other decisions businesspeople take in an effort to stay viable.

California almonds have remained remarkably price-stable despite soaring acreage. Sullivan and others attribute that at least in part to a savvy worldwide marketing campaign.

“It’s like any crop,” she said. “I think it’s cyclical. I think in maybe 10-20 years, people will be pulling out almonds and going to something else.”

Sullivan is aware of the amount of new acreage going in, but she said she can hardly criticize other growers for switching to a high-value crop.

“You can’t stop somebody from planting a crop just because you have it,” she said.

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