

Editorial: State's growing, and thirsty, almond industry sowing seeds of discontent

By the Editorial Board

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From Kern County to Tehama, rows of almond trees line the land. They are little more than trunks and sticks at this time of year. Look closely, though, and you can see subtle changes underway. New growth swells from otherwise bare limbs, signaling what will be an explosion of color and pollen any day now.

At this moment in early February, the state's population of honeybees has grown by the billions, having migrated here from Oregon, Texas and as far away as Florida. They had help getting here, riding in big trucks, each of which carried hundreds of hives.

The bees are languid now, milling about the white wooden hives that have been placed, two per acre, around the orchards. They await that moment, this week or next, when the orchards burst into spectacular bloom and they can start the important work of pollinating California's most valuable crop.

That's right. Almonds. Not grapes, or tomatoes, or strawberries, or any other iconic California produce. Exceptional wine may be what the world thinks of as California's agricultural bounty, but it is almonds that dominate the farmland these days in the Golden State. Only hay commands more agricultural acreage, though its value is a fraction of the approximately \$6 billion a year that almonds earn.

It's California's new Gold Rush. And, like any boom of yore, it has become both a blessing and a curse.

The Great Almond Rush has brought billions to the state's economy. But it has also raised existential questions about water rights, land use and development, the environment, ethical food policy, fracking, job creation and this fertile state's responsibility to feed the world.

In the coming year, The Sacramento Bee's editorial board will explore how California almonds intersect with the forces shaping the state's future by engaging with experts, policy makers and lawmakers, academics, business people, farmers and many others.

California grows more than 80 percent of the world's almonds, and the world keeps gobbling them up. Demand outpaces supply, thanks to smart marketing, and profits roll in. It's such a lucrative business that in recent years farmers have pulled out traditional row crops to start their own orchards – *hasta la vista* melons and tomatoes – even though it takes two years after planting to start producing the seeds.

The almond acreage in California has doubled in the past decade, according to the Almond Board of California, and [continues to increase by about 20,000 acres of productive trees every year](#). Where it will – or should – end, no one can say. Speculators have planted orchards in places without a secure water source, leading to questions about the viability of this growing industry.

The last few years have been fruitful for California's almond industry, marking new highs in acreage and production – expected to be about 1.85 billion pounds last year. But 2014 marked a low point, as well: It was the year that the delicious, nutritious seed emerged as the archvillain in the latest chapter of the state's water debate.

Journalists parachuted into the Central Valley from all over the world to take up the story of the drought and the thirsty

almond trees, and seemed to take sides. The Atlantic magazine's article about the "dark side" featured an online link referring to the "demon nut," which is ridiculous, as almonds are neither evil nor nuts. Mother Jones magazine crunched numbers and [declared that it took an amazing 1.1 gallons of water to produce just a single almond](#). And this month, Good magazine ran an article with the headline "[Almonds are sucking California dry](#)" that suggested people eat broccoli instead.

Severely diminished water resources are pitting Californians against each other: fisheries against agriculture; farmers with surface water against those without; urban communities against rural, north against south. And almost everyone against almond growers. Growers can't fallow almond groves like other crops – the trees need a constant water source during the course of their long lives, up to 30 years, which has led to overdrafting of groundwater, questionable water transfers and the neglect of other crops.

Opinions about almonds are not likely to improve this year. After the driest January on record in parts of the state, it seems certain we are headed for another year of below-average rainfall, this current storm notwithstanding. The federal government is leaning on California to increase the flows of its rivers to help salmon and other endangered species survive, thus reducing the water available for agriculture. In January, the State Water Resources Control Board announced that water deliveries may be cut back again this year. Even if the state gets drenched this year, aquifers will need years to recharge.

The one-dimensional narrative about water-sucking trees and the greedy growers willing to endanger the state's water supplies to get in on the action is far from the full story of California's almonds.

Water usage aside, the seed is hailed as a locally raised source of protein (the largest market for California's almonds is the U.S. and Canada) that doesn't have the environmental impact of animals raised for meat, and as a replacement for dairy and wheat products for people with allergies or aversions to either.

It's a picture we will fill out in the coming year as we look closely at the demands on California's fruitful bounty and its natural resources by the ever-growing state and an insatiable world.