

A farmer's straight talk on the drought: Listen up, city dwellers

It was heating up in the San Joaquin Valley this week. Joe Del Bosque, a farmer who had to make some hard decisions this year, was driving toward an asparagus field he's about to plow under. The windshield of his white Yukon was splattered with dead bugs. He didn't seem to notice.

As he drove, he told me a story that has become all too familiar in the last few months.

His sister was at a dinner party in the Bay Area, he said. An engineer sitting next to her asked where she was from. When she told him she grew up on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, he said, "Oh, every time I drive by it makes my blood boil to see all those almonds growing there."

Del Bosque was incredulous.

[Drought devastates cherry crop, puts some growers out of business](#)

"This is an educated guy. A smart farmer is going to pick the crops the market wants. And every time someone buys food in the store, they're telling us what we should be planting."

What consumers are saying is: almonds. Plant almonds.

This does not sit well with urbanites, who have suddenly become self-appointed water experts.

In the last week, a drunk man at a Culver City karaoke bar and a perfectly sober therapist in Venice both railed at me about "selfish" almond growers who have no business planting such a thirsty crop in a drought. I shared the stories with Del Bosque, who has devoted about a third of his 2,000 acres to almonds.

Abruptly, he pulled off the road and parked next to an almond orchard.

"You know what? I want to show you something," he said. With his engine running, he got out of his truck and plucked an unripe almond. He sliced it open.

"Everyone who criticizes almonds? They've never really seen one."

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He made a passionate speech about the virtues of the almond and the shortcomings of its distant relative, the peach. Peaches are the Kate Middleton of agriculture. They get nothing but glowing press.

"Have you ever seen a peach?" Del Bosque asked. "When it's young, it looks just like this. But when you eat a ripe peach, you are eating 90% water. There's more nutrients in this little seed than in a whole peach. This is what people don't understand."

Yes, it's come to this: beleaguered almond farmers are beating up on peaches.

It's not that Del Bosque has anything against peaches. He's just frustrated that the almond — desirable, profitable and healthy — has become the anti-Christ of the California drought.

I suggested that almond growers are partly to blame. They have lost control of their own narrative.

Despite what you think, almonds are not a [particularly thirsty crop](#). Huge amounts of water are used for things you'd

never think of. I read the other day that it takes [80,000 gallons of water](#) to make enough steel for one car.

"Yeah," Del Bosque said. "Farmers just aren't very good at communicating."

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But he is trying.

At 66, he's made himself into a symbol of the water-challenged family farmer. He is available, and patient. He calmly offers the farmer's take on government-imposed water restrictions without impugning environmentalists or the endangered delta smelt.

Last year, just after Del Bosque discovered Twitter, he read that President Obama was coming to Fresno to talk about the drought.

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"The next morning I got on Twitter. I said, 'Mr. President, I invite you to come to my farm for a discussion on the drought's effect on our farms and our people.' I just threw it out there, you know, into Tweeterworld."

A week later, on Valentine's Day 2014, there he was, squiring the president and Gov. Jerry Brown across his land, next to a 125-acre cantaloupe field that had been fallowed for lack of water.

"We get a million melons from that field, I told the president. And all those jobs are not going to be here this year."

At the request of the president's advance team, Del Bosque had parked a sparkling new tractor behind some hay bales, good optics for a presidential photo op.

"I asked the president, 'Do you know what kind of tractor that is?' He said, 'John Deere. We love John Deere in Illinois. I said, 'When we buy a tractor here, we create jobs in Illinois. And when we don't have water, we don't buy tractors.'"

Brown's questions, said Del Bosque, were pointed.

"The governor said, 'Well, why *are* they planting all these almond trees?'

"I said, 'Governor, because there is such a demand for almonds.' That's it. Plain and simple."

Since Obama's visit, the drought has worsened.

And Del Bosque has fallowed more fields.

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Every year, Del Bosque sits down with an agronomist to figure out what he can plant based on how much water he's saved up in nearby San Luis Reservoir. In the last two years, his supply has dwindled, so he must calculate carefully.

Almonds are untouchable. Tomatoes and asparagus, not so much.

Del Bosque, whose license plate says "Melons," won't sacrifice his organic cantaloupes either. Upscale grocers such as Whole Foods pay a premium for them — \$11 a box instead of \$7. He does not want to compromise those business relationships, which take time to build.

During the melon harvest, June to October, he and his wife, Gloria, spend every day outside with their crews. The children of migrant workers, they've spent their lives in the field. Most of their hands return every year, but their numbers are shrinking. He used to send out 1,000 W-2s. Lately, only 600 or 700.

Driving back to his office, we passed acres and acres of fallowed field. Del Bosque did not admit to much emotion. "My people, though, when they pass by here, they want to cry."

I thought about the engineer, the karaoke bar guy and the therapist. Unlike Del Bosque's farmworkers, the drought has caused barely a ripple in the lifestyles of city dwellers.

Picking on almond farmers might be all the rage, but it will do nothing to solve the state's water shortage. If people understood that, perhaps they wouldn't be so quick to judge.

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