

# Almond Board announces new research efforts

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Almond industry leaders, who have faced questions about the crop's water use amid the drought, announced new research into conservation Thursday.

The water studies are part of \$2.5 million in research on farming practices planned in the fiscal year starting Wednesday for the Almond Board of California, based in Modesto.

The research will build on the savings already achieved, mainly through a shift by many growers from flood irrigation to drip and micro-sprinklers.

"Over the past 20 years, the amount of water to produce a pound of almonds has decreased by about a third," said Richard Waycott, the board's chief executive officer. He spoke via a telephone news conference along with Bob Curtis, the director of agricultural affairs.

Waycott said the board does not have a specific goal for the increased level of conservation. But he did note that then-Chairman Bill Harp called in December for the industry to repeat the one-third reduction.

Almonds have become the most lucrative farm product in the Northern San Joaquin Valley. It produces about 30 percent of the state's crop, which in turn is about 80 percent of the world supply. Stanislaus County alone reported \$1.13 billion in gross income to growers in 2013.

But that recent success has coincided with an extreme drought. Growers have increased groundwater pumping to make up for reduced river supplies, and some annual crops are being fallowed this year to keep almonds and other permanent plantings alive.

Critics harp on two points: It takes a gallon of water to produce a single almond, and most of the crop is exported rather than feeding the domestic market.

The industry responds that many foods exceed almonds for water use per pound, and the export income boosts the California economy.

Curtis said drip and micro-sprinklers, which direct water to the tree roots, are the biggest drivers in the increased yield of almonds from each acre.

"We're getting more crop per drop," he said.

The board, which is funded by a per-pound assessment on growers, will use some of the \$2.5 million for research into pest management, air quality, pollinating bee health and other farm topics. The studies are done by independent experts.

Waycott said growers have been able to rent enough bees for pollination despite the troubles in the beekeeping business. Chief among them is colony collapse disorder, in which a larger-than-normal percentage of bees do not make it through winter.

The CEO praised the work of the Honey Bee Health Coalition, which involves beekeepers, food producers, scientists and other partners.

Thursday's announcement drew praise from Bill Lyons Jr., who grows almonds and other crops southwest of

Modesto and is a former secretary of food and agriculture for California.

“Over the past 20 years, ABC research has helped growers become even better stewards of the land, water and environment,” he said in a news release.

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