

Q&A Almonds



with
BRIAN WAHLBRINK

Harvest 101: Part Two

Brian Wahlbrink, Sperry Farms' CFO and a co-owner along with founder Jeff Sperry and CEO Wes Sperry, shares what to expect from future harvests and the importance of incorporate technology and research.

Don't forget to check out part one to discover what goes into the almond harvest!

Q How have resource needs changed the almond harvest?

WAHLBRINK | The industry as a whole has gone through such a wonderful transformation in going to microirrigation, and there have been such good water savings with that. Like nearly 80 percent of almond farms, we use microirrigation and it's been great to have the Almond Board's support with research and education to show the importance of water efficiency. We use a lot less water than the very early years.

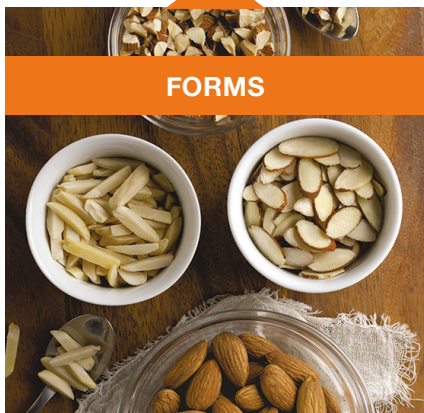
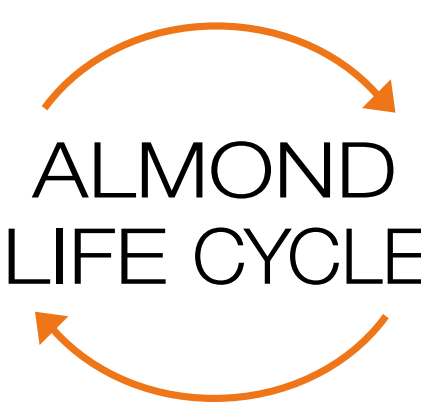
Another area we're working on is improving air quality during harvest. Because almonds are harvested onto the ground to dry naturally before being collected up, the harvest process creates dust. We have a couple pilot projects going on right now; I'm currently the chairman of the harvest working group on the Almond Board, and it's a really progressive, forward-thinking group tackling how we can address this issue.

Q How else is harvest changing?

WAHLBRINK | Varietals are a main focus with a lot of innovation happening with self-compatible varieties. Instead of requiring the pollen from another variety for cross-pollination and to set the crop, these new varieties only need pollen moved within each flower, requiring fewer bees. Bee cost has risen so high at the grower level. But, we're always focused on bee health as well. We work with research groups not only at the industry level but at the grower level making sure that our practices keep bees safe.

Another way harvest is changing is through a big push focusing energy, research and trials on off-ground harvesting. We know there are a lot of potential challenges with that, but we also know there's a lot of opportunity with technologies that catch the almonds before they hit the ground and that has a lot of positive impacts, including dust reduction. You get water back on the trees faster, for one, and it really opens up a lot of options for what you can do with the orchard floor. Things like cover crops and even pastures of wildflowers for bees become very realistic possibilities.

So we're trying to visualize the almond orchard of the future. We're looking all the way into 2050 and asking, "What will the almond orchard look like? Will it be more mechanized? Will there be drone use?" We try to get futuristic.



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