

Almond industry weighs measures for cutting harvest-related air pollution

By John Cox

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As Central Valley almond growers gear up for the annual harvest in coming weeks, efforts are underway to reduce the amount of air pollution kicked up as part of the process.

Among recent developments are a decision by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to set aside \$10 million in incentives for California almond growers to replace conventional equipment with new, cleaner technology and an industry initiative aimed at testing out new methods for controlling dust.

The industry has been on notice it needs to institute new pollution control measures since the California Air Resources Board found in 2012 that orchard activities — mostly the gathering up of almonds shaken to the ground by harvesting machines — produces 69 pounds of suspended particles per acre per year.

The Almond Board of California aims to reduce that amount by half by 2025. An official with the group said Monday it's working now to set benchmarks for achieving that goal.

Almonds, Kern's No. 2-grossing crop after table grapes, present greater air-pollution concern than pistachios, which rank No. 3 in the county. The difference is that pistachios harvesting machines catch the nuts before they hit the ground, while almonds must be swept and then vacuumed up, both of which kick up dust that worsens the Central Valley's airborne particulate matter.

The biggest challenge is how to pay for the transition to cleaner technology, said Roger Isom, president and CEO of the Fresno-based Western Agricultural Processors Association.

Progress is being made, he said, but with some growers using machines they bought in the 1980s, there's a long way to go. Dust-reducing equipment must be affordable if farmers are going to be able to buy it and put it in use, Isom added.

Two government agencies have provided incentives to help individual farmers pay for replacement equipment. One of them, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, has spent \$2 million during the last two years giving growers grants covering half the cost of new technology.

District officials on Monday disclosed the \$10 million in newly available federal money, saying they hope to make that funding available in the form of incentives as soon as this fall.

Another source of money for transitioning to cleaner equipment is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Although the agency could not be reached for comment Monday, its website lists a number of products found to cut the amount of dust created during the almond harvest.

There are other ways to reduce harvest-related air pollution without spending lots of money on new equipment. The almond board has recently been sharing relevant tips in newsletters, videos and other informational materials intended for growers and their workers.

For example, the board is urging almond growers to adopt industry-best practices such as blowing dust back into their orchards, keeping sweeper-machine heads at optimal levels and reducing the number of times they run harvesting equipment through orchards.

Air-quality activists want additional steps taken.

Shafter-area almond grower and air-quality advocate Tom Frantz said country roads should be actively maintained as a way of suppressing dust. He also said the air district should require that all harvesting machinery be equipped with the best available technology.

Ultimately, Frantz said, the industry should use equipment that doesn't let almonds touch the ground.

The almond board's chief scientific officer, Josette Lewis, said that approach will probably be adopted by some growers and that her organization is working to document how well various manufacturers' products accomplish that goal.

But another possibility, which she termed a "hybrid approach," would allow almonds to fall to the ground in an orderly way that forgoes the need for a sweeper, which she asserted is the biggest cause of almond-related air pollution.

Some almond farmers gladly embrace new technology, Lewis said. "Then there's those who are skeptical and those for whom the cost over time to purchase new equipment definitely will be a factor," she added.

The key, she said, is offering growers' maximum flexibility to help the industry meet its dust-control goals.

"It's all about choices for the growers," she said.