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It's dusty work, but we're figuring out how to make the air cleaner

By Brian Wahlbrink

In the Central Valley, almond harvest means different things to all of us. For almond farmers like me, it's the busiest time of year as we shake, sweep and pick up the crop we have cultivated all year. My team comes together in the orchards and we're able to see the results of all our hard work.

However, for many valley residents, harvest also means dust.

The increase of dust particles in the air during harvest time is an issue, drifting over backyards, blanketing cars and settling in swimming pools. It can also block drivers' ability to see when driving past an orchard, making signs that read "Caution, low visibility – dusty area ahead" a common sight on Central Valley roads.

We farmers understand dust can be a nuisance, so we're doing something about it.

Over the past decade, the Almond Board of California has invested in research to develop practices that can reduce dust and the associated issues that come with it during harvest. Many of these practices are being implemented in orchards up and down the Central Valley.

In 2015, the research was transformed into an educational campaign for farmers, distributing information on reducing dust through a series of videos, technical guides, orchard workshops and equipment demonstrations.

But there is more to be done.

Last year, I jumped at the opportunity to lead the newly formed Harvest Workgroup, a collection of almond farmers, processors, advisers and equipment manufacturers brought together by the Almond Board of California. Our mission is to improve air quality during harvest by guiding research and taking a progressive, forward-thinking approach to the issue through innovation.

What we're really doing is trying to imagine the almond orchard of the future.

The research we're doing will accelerate efforts we believe will result in cleaner air for all who live in the Valley.

Some of the areas we're exploring include changing the structure and layout of our orchards to implement harvest techniques similar to pistachios or grapes. We are doing our due diligence to ensure these changes can have both a positive environmental impact and be viable for farmers, something that takes time.

Outside of the working group, some farmers are running experiments of their own.

Earlier this month, I invited equipment manufacturers out to my farm to run side-by-side tests of dust and debris production using three very different pieces of machinery. Running trials like this in the middle of the busy harvest season can make things even more chaotic and requires sacrificing some of the crop, but it is absolutely worth the effort and cost.

Over 90 percent of those in our industry are family farmers; we live, work and raise our families on the land. So we all have a vested interest in improving harvest air quality.

Almond Board-funded projects and pet projects like mine will help get us there, bringing to life our forward-thinking approaches as we explore the technology and innovation required to make this shift. Our industry is committed to reducing the dust from our harvests, and I am proud to be helping to lead these efforts.

Brian Wahlbrink is co-owner of Sperry Farms in Denair and Chairman of the Almond Board of California's Harvest Workgroup.