

AGRI-PULSE

Almond Alliance details policy priorities for 2023

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By: Brad Hooker



Almond Alliance President and CEO Aubrey Bettencourt at the 2022 Almond Conference. (photo: Brad Hooker)

The Almond Alliance of California is carving a new brand for specialty crops in federal policymaking, edging out Midwest row crops that typically dominate Farm Bill discussions. The advocacy group has also embarked on bold strategies to address the shipping crisis, control the narrative on water use and turn almonds from a luxury product to a staple of nutrition programs.

“Almonds actually have a great reputation,” said Almond Alliance President and CEO Aubrey Bettencourt, during a discussion at the Almond Board of California’s annual Almond Conference last week in Sacramento. “We just have to be in the room to talk about it.”

Bettencourt seized on that reputation to “weaponize communications” with the shipping crisis earlier this year and change the perception on almonds.

While other trade groups “put a lot of stock” into the legislative process for crafting the federal Ocean Shipping Reform Act, Bettencourt knew time was running short and growers needed tens of thousands of containers by August to get almonds to markets in time for key international holidays. Most of the media attention, however, centered on imports and on getting Christmas presents to stores on time, she explained. But Bettencourt saw an opportunity to leverage agricultural exports as an American brand.

“When it sits on a shelf somewhere, that's America sitting on that shelf somewhere,” she said. “If we are not there, America is not there—and that is a nationwide problem.”

That narrative fueled a 60-day media blitz. Within one week, the issue swept the covers of The New York Times and the San Francisco Chronicle along with a feature on National Public Radio, reaching about 77 million people in all. In April the Almond Alliance joined five other California agriculture groups in calling for a deal with the major carriers to restore services.

“We cannot emphasize this enough: The viability of our industry, the rural and disadvantaged communities that depend on it, and the global competitiveness of our nation are at stake,” they wrote.

The following week California Senators Dianne Feinstein and Alex Padilla pushed carrier company executives to ease the global food shortage by acquiring more containers for agricultural exports.

By the end of that day, Bettencourt had already fielded a call from a shipping line CEO who wanted his name out of the news stories. She pushed him for more containers and a four-day receiving window.

“The story was now about the American farmer,” she said. “It wasn't about how we were needing too much water. We were actually the face of the story of the supply chain crisis.”

That opened up more options for exporting out of ports in Southern California as well as in Houston, Texas; Norfolk, Virginia; and Savannah, Georgia. The alliance formed a “tiger team” of farmers, handlers, logistics managers and trucking partners to engage with carriers, rail companies and ports. They leveraged precise data on global markets from the Almond Board to tell carriers exactly what they needed to export and when.

The Almond Alliance is taking a calculated approach to water issues as well. The advocacy group concentrated their engagement on the Department of Water Resources, since the State Water Resources Control Board is a politically appointed body with a riskier dynamic at play, according to Bettencourt. By tweaking specific regulations and operations—the “boring housewife things”—the group could bring more tools directly to farmers more quickly than higher level engagement with the governor's office.

In coordination with the alliance as well as Western United Dairies, the community group Self-Help Enterprises and the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, DWR has launched LandFlex, a grant program paying farmers to reduce groundwater pumping near communities with vulnerable drinking wells. The administration is touting LandFlex as a critical tool for implementing the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act during a severe drought. The program takes a different approach by giving farmers credit for the actual amount of water they save rather than the amount of acres they fallow, Bettencourt underscored.

“The whole idea is to keep our farmers farming, which is giving you the financial stability and regulatory certainty that you need,” she said.

On the federal side, the alliance will be engaging closely with Congress to reauthorize the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act as well as the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), a vehicle for federal defense spending on the Army Corps of Engineers. Bettencourt explained that the Bureau of Reclamation, which stores water, is often at odds with the Army Corps, which aims to minimize flood risk. The Almond Alliance is pushing for language directing the Army Corps to create more operational flexibility to capture floodwaters for storage, particularly for beneficial groundwater recharge.

Bettencourt has hired Sara Arsenault, a former federal lobbyist for the California Farm Bureau, to engage on the Farm Bill. Arsenault's top objective is to amplify the role of almonds in food access and security, which could help in offloading a record high inventory this year.

"Almonds should be treated as a base commodity globally," said Bettencourt, who noted that the tree nuts rank fourth in value for U.S. agricultural exports. "It really should be corn, wheat, soy, rice, almonds."

In Sacramento, an unusually high turnover in the Legislature has triggered a footrace among advocacy groups to get time with the new lawmakers. Bettencourt sees it as investing in relationships that will last a decade. Arsenault led a tour of the Almond Conference showroom for several of those legislators, along with staff from the governor's office and legislative staff. Bettencourt's approach is to "get in early and get in often," which has led to multiple one-on-one conversations with Gov. Gavin Newsom over water and supply chain issues. She hopes to expand the nutrition argument for almonds to new lawmakers outside of agricultural regions, whose districts house food processors and constituents concerned over food prices.

The California Fish and Game Commission has also gained a significant amount of attention from the Almond Alliance, which is leading an agricultural coalition opposing protections for native bee species.

In September, the California Supreme Court denied an appeal filed by the alliance to take up a case against the commission. The coalition had initially prevailed in its lawsuit concerning a petition brought on by environmental groups to list four native bumblebees under fish protections. But an appellate court judge overturned the ruling and the supreme court cast that as the final decision on the claim. The supreme court justices, however, suggested to legislators that "some clarification may be in order" for extending the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) to invertebrates, setting the groundwork for potential new legislation in 2023. In the meantime, the bees now qualify for CESA protections while the petition is under review.

The listing poses a serious threat to almond farmers. According to Bettencourt, honeybees brought to California for almond pollination could be considered a competitor to the native species, since they rely on many of the same food sources. While almonds have the largest amount of certified bee-friendly acreage, CESA does not allow for a carveout when stakeholders show they are voluntarily contributing toward a solution—as the federal Endangered Species Act allows.

The alliance, however, recognized the regulations have the potential to halt wildfire prevention activities, since one of the species lives near forests. Bettencourt also argued the regulations would incentivize farmers to remove existing pollinator habitat, upending years of conservation work and diminishing the returns on millions of dollars in state and federal grants. She is hoping to cut a deal over a safe harbor agreement with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the agency tasked with implementing CESA protections.

The coalition has brought in new attorneys to scrutinize the public review process and is collaborating with the Almond Board to assemble a team of experts with track records in quantifying the benefits to pollinators from agricultural lands. The alliance is pulling the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into the discussions as well, since the agency is on a timeline to list the Western monarch butterfly as a pollinator under federal protections. Bettencourt acknowledged a three-party agreement would be a complicated lift but was hopeful they could reach a compromise that would deliver better conservation results than the blunt regulatory approach.

Throughout the discussion at the Almond Conference, Bettencourt returned to her point that the numbers tell the story best—with on-farm conservation, water use efficiency and the massive economic might of almonds.