

cbc.ca

You may want to think twice about buying California almonds

Health advocates have been extolling the benefits of almonds for years. And, increasingly, products like almond milk and almond butter are taking up space on kitchen shelves.

But there is a movement in California discouraging almond consumption, thanks to that state's massive, years-long drought. The drought is affecting almost everyone in the state and compelled state Governor [Jerry Brown to announce unprecedented water conservation measures last month](#).

Critics, though, say officials aren't targeting the right people: farmers.

Farmers account for the biggest share of water use in California, and almonds are a major crop in the state.



A movement in California discouraging almond consumption is on the rise, due to high water use on almond farms. (Mike Mozart/Flickr)

According to the Almond Hullers and Processors Association, the group that represents the industry, each nut requires [about four litres of water to grow](#).

Adam Keats, director of the California Water Law Project at the non-profit Center for Biological Diversity, is among those who say that's too much.

"On a personal level, I have reduced and nearly eliminated my

consumption of California almonds," he said. "Everyone consuming California almonds should recognize that right now, at the stage of the drought that we're in, they're consuming a disproportionate amount of a state resource — that is, California water."

But the Almond Hullers and Processors Association suggests Keats and other environmentalists are overreacting. It says the amount of water consumed by almond growers per acre has declined over the past two decades and is comparable to other California crops. Water consumption is lower per ounce than for some other sources of protein, including peas, lentils and beef, the group says.

It also notes that almond hulls are used as livestock feed, so in fact, each litre of water used to grow almonds produces two crops, not just one.

The association says that agriculture as a whole is water-intensive, but is critical to the state economy.

California is responsible for producing more than [80 per cent of the global supply of almonds](#), according to the Almond Board of California.

Last year, the board estimated the state would produce 840 million kilograms of almonds. At four litres of water per nut, that's a lot of water.

When it comes down to it, almonds are lucrative, and Keats worries the nut industry has successfully lobbied to be exempt from water conservation measures.

"All the expansion of the almond, pistachio and other nut tree cropland in California is in places that have historically and geographically extremely low amounts of rain," he explained.

"So they require extreme amounts of imported water to create these tree farms for these water-intensive crops."

The solutions, Keats said, are simple, but tough.

He said almonds should no longer be grown in desert regions of the state. Instead, they should be restricted to a handful of valleys that get enough rain for almond trees to flourish without irrigation. That would mean entire orchards would have to be dug up.

"I think that there will be a time when California almonds and pistachios will be socially unacceptable in a lot of circles. A lot of people will shun those crops. I hope that happens," Keats said.

"And I hope that other parts of the world that have a natural ability to grow those crops will step up and provide an alternative."