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## Postcard from Hughson

By Kate Pickert

The white boxes parked in California's almond orchards this time of year are easy to spot. Stacked in sets of four or six, they squat between dead-straight rows of trees awash in blossoms. (A walk through an almond orchard in early March is not unlike a stroll past a department-store perfume counter.) From afar, the boxes look as if they might provide a weary farmer a place to sit or store his tools. But get close enough under the right conditions--dry, above 55°, no more than a light breeze--and you can hear and see one of the most vital relationships in modern American agriculture: the droning dance of honey bees feasting on almond pollen.

Almonds are a huge business in California's Central Valley; the state's 660,000 nut-producing acres are responsible for some 90% of the world's crop. Every almond we eat is the result of multiple acts of pollination; without a massive number of bees to flit among the blossoms, growers say, almond trees would produce scarcely a tenth as many nuts. That's why, every February, more than a million beehives--with a total of some 20 billion bees--are shipped in on flatbed trucks from all over the country. ([Video: TIME visits the buzzing almond orchards of northern California](#))

It's a sweet, symbiotic relationship: the annual pilgrimage keeps California's \$2.2 billion almond industry ticking and is a huge moneymaker for more than half the country's commercial beekeepers. But this year, some worry that relationship is starting to sour. Driven by surging global demand, California's almond growers have doubled acreage since 1981, forcing them to lean heavily on imported bees from as far away as Vermont. Drive along the unlined roads around Hughson, and it's easy to find 10 different almond farmers renting hives from 10 different states. Orin Johnson, whose family has been keeping bees around Hughson since the 1950s, remembers when beekeepers earned

less than \$10 per hive in pollination fees to supplement their main business: honey. "Almonds were nothing," says Johnson, examining some of his 700 hives, his snow white hair peeking out from beneath a green trucker hat. Today about 60% of Johnson's business is pollination. (The honey made from almond blossoms is too bitter to eat and is not harvested.)

The industrial pollination may be starting to take its toll on the bees. Many keepers are feeding their colonies corn syrup, sugar and pollen substitute to artificially bulk up hives ahead of the almond season, while killing off parasitic mites with pesticides. Plus, parking the hives smack in the middle of this land of almonds "is comparable to us going to McDonald's every day for a month," says Johnson. "In the past, you'd have a blend of sources, and [the bees] seemed so much healthier." Johnson and many bee researchers believe this monocultural diet may have contributed to the recent epidemic of colony-collapse disorder (CCD)--a mysterious phenomenon that can kill up to 90% of a hive's insects and whose root cause is still unknown. CCD has helped cause a nationwide bee shortage; rental price spiked to as much as \$160 per hive last year.

Consequently, California's almond growers are getting stung. Dave Phippen, a partner in his family's farm in nearby Manteca, just paid \$150 per hive to a Texas supplier. "If we didn't put any bees out here, I think we'd have a crop failure," he says, "and I'm not about to learn." Three years of record yields have depressed almond prices to half their peak; many growers will be lucky to break even this year. Meanwhile, a drought led Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency on Feb. 27. Some almond farmers didn't even rent bees this year, figuring they wouldn't have enough water to irrigate their trees all summer. Ironically, it's been rainy around Hughson, cutting hours for active pollination short. This area's almond crop may suffer. Regardless, growers have few choices. "I'm in it for the long haul," says Jim Hudelson, a fifth-generation Hughson almond farmer. "When you become a tree farmer, you have to commit to it."

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