2003 Project Report: Deficit Irrigation Management During Hull-Split

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Objective: The objective of this project is to test the practicality and benefits of a plant-based deficit irrigation strategy during hull split. The expected short term benefits are: 1) water savings, 2) reduced incidence of hull rot, 3) improved harvestability, and 4) an overall reduction in the level of tree water stress during and after harvest. The potential long term benefits include increased return bloom and improved overall tree health, but such benefits may not become apparent during the course of the project.

Background: Irrigation management is a key element in almond production, and previous almond board funded research by B. Teviotdale and D. Goldhamer has shown that hull rot and sticktights can both be reduced by deficit irrigation during hull split, but the best way to manage this deficit has not been determined. Deficit water management during this period is particularly difficult, because by the end of hull split, irrigation must be suspended for harvest, and hence the grower runs the risk of causing excessive late season tree water stress, which has also been shown to be detrimental to return bloom and ultimately to almond production. A plant-based approach to managing deficit irrigation (midday stem water potential, "SWP") has been very successful in prunes, and we have previously shown that the same technique can be applied in almonds.

Procedures: This was the third year of the project, and, as in 2002, was performed on grower demonstration plots in the main almond growing regions of the state (Table1). In each plot the growers normal irrigation practice was compared to a Regulated Deficit Irrigation (RDI) practice, which was based on achieving a "target" level of midday stem water potential (SWP). Midday SWP was measured with a pressure chamber on at least 10 trees per treatment in each plot. The target level of SWP prior to hull split was from -7 to -9 bars, which is the value that is expected for fully irrigated almonds under typical midday weather conditions. During hull split, the target SWP was from-14 to -18 bars (mild to moderate stress), and following hull split the target was returned to the baseline value (from -7 to -9 bars). The progression of hull split was monitored, as well as yield, nut size, harvestability and the occurrence of hull rot strikes. Observations were also made regarding any differences between the treatments in barking injury or other important production characteristics.

Results and discussion: Table 2 summarizes the results from each site for this year, and as was noted in the 2002 almond board report, **a number of the growers participating in this study have started using our RDI recommendations to guide irrigation for the rest of their orchards.** This is a very positive outcome, but in some cases it has made it difficult for us to maintain the control plots in the desired “wet” range (-7 to -9 bars), for instance, this year many growers kept their orchards in the -10 to -14 range even prior to the onset of hull split (Table 2, first column). The range of values that we have observed in the growers plots however, also supports our position that **the current RDI recommendation of -14 to -18 bars during hull split does not represent a severe or damaging stress to the almond tree.** It is also important to note that the use of RDI did not result in severe water stress after hull split or harvest because SWP recovered well (Table 2, sixth column). This means that **growers can use irrigation management to effectively adjust the degree of water stress in the orchard.**

Table1. Sites and site information for the 2003 almond RDI trials.

County	Location	Soil type	Orchard age (yr)	Irrigation system type	Approximate dates of hull split
Tehama	Corning (A)	Silt-Loam	9	Microsprinkler	15 August - 10 Sept.
Tehama	Corning (B)	Gravel-Loam	9	Microsprinkler	15 August - 10 Sept.
Butte	Chico	Vina-Loam	9	Solid-set Sprinkler	15 July - 8 August
Glenn	Orland	Silt & Gravel Loam	24	Solid-set Sprinkler	20 July - 4 August
Colusa	Arbuckle	Gravel-Loam (Class 2)	13	Single line drip	15 July - 14 August
Solano	Dixon	Yolo Silty Clay Loam	8	Sprinkler	24 July - 10 August
Madera	Madera	Dinuba FSL	10	Microsprinkler	24 July - 3 August
Kern	Shafter	Sandy Loam	15	Microsprinkler	8 July - 1 August

Hull rot was not an important problem this year, but in most cases it was reduced by RDI, particularly in Madera (Table 2). As we reported in 2002, RDI generally advances hull split, but because our growers have generally reduced irrigation for the rest of their orchards, the advancing effect of RDI was not as noticeable this year as it has been in previous years.

The first year of this study was 2001, but because RDI was imposed after the crop was set and we expected to see no differences in yield the first year, yield data was collected in only 2 of the 8 sites. In fact, these two sites showed no yield difference in 2001 (Table 3), and whether we only consider the same two sites for all of the subsequent years, or all of the sites together, **there is no indication that RDI is having any negative impact on orchard yields (Table 3).**

Table 3. Three year yield summary (lbs. nutmeats per acre) for all of the sights in the study.

Treatment	2001 (2 sites)	2002 (8 sites)	2003 (8 sites)
Grower	2,400	3,215	2,757
RDI	2,425	3,109	2,735

Conclusions: RDI can be managed effectively by measuring midday stem water potential (SWP) using the pressure chamber method, and a target of -14 to -18 bars SWP during hull split appears to reduce hull rot and increase hull splitting and harvestability. Based on three consecutive years of yield data from 2 orchards, and 2 consecutive years of yield data from 8 orchards, there appear to be no detrimental effects of this level of stress on yield or nut size.

Table 2. Summary of the observed and target SWP values for all locations in the 2003 almond RDI trials, as well as the treatment effects on hull splitting, hull rot, yield and nut size.

Location	Average SWP prior to hull split (Bar) RDI target: -7 to -9		Average SWP during hull split (Bar) RDI target: -14 to -18		Average SWP after hull split (Bar) RDI target: -7 to -9		Effects on Hull splitting		Hull rot (strikes per tree)		Yield (lbs nutmeats per acre)		Nut size (grams per nut)	
	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI	Grower	RDI
Corning (A)	-10.4	-11.6	-12.8	-13.3	-12.9	-13.1	(RDI 8 days ahead)		0	0	2,536	1,989	1.18	1.21
Corning (B)	-10.9	-14.6	-17.4	-21.1	-10.4	-12.2	(RDI 6 days ahead)		0	0	2,607	2,759	1.26	1.15
Chico	-11.2	-11.5	-11.0	-15.1	-9.4	-9.5	(No difference)		2.8	6.5	2,263	2,225	1.37	1.32
Orland	-13.7	-13.6	-14.8	-16.0	-15.3	-16.6	(RDI 2 days behind)		0.7	0.4	2,072	3,296	1.58	1.60
Arbuckle	-10.1	-9.7	-13.1	-15.1	-14.8	-16.2	(No difference)		0	0	2,439	2,037	1.40	1.42
Dixon	-9.6	-10.5	-11.1	-15.4	-13.8	-14.2	(RDI 3 days ahead)		0	0	4,890	4,804	1.27	1.27
Madera	-9.8	-12.8	-9.8	-12.9	-9.5	-11.5	(No difference)		17.7	2	2,250	1,795	1.4	1.31
Kern	-11.8	-13.0	-12.3	-19.1	-9.8	-10.5	(No difference)[1]		2.9	4.0	3,000	2,928	1.23	1.13
Average									3.0	1.6	2,757	2,735	1.33	1.30

Notes:

[1] RDI had less sticktights (99/tree vs 147/trree)