Using collaborative data platforms to manage workflow and information in a rapidly expanding almond operation.

**Challenge**
Vann Brothers has seen rapid growth of their almond orchard as part of their vertically integrated operation. A growing team, new legislation and an increased demand for transparency from the end-consumers of their product meant that old record keeping methods were no longer viable.

**Solution**
The decision was made to implement the Agworld platform so that collaborators on every level can collect data in a structured way and that this data can be shared with everyone else that is involved in the process.

**Result**
Through the adoption of the Agworld platform, Vann Brothers has cut down on the time needed for data entry and has improved insights on their business. Because of this, Vann Brothers is able to make better and more profitable decisions at every level of their business and is therefore improving their agronomic and financial results.

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Blake Vann
Vann Brothers, Williams CA
An almond focused business

Vann Brothers is a vertically integrated family farming operation located in Williams, Northern California. The family business currently exists out of the farming operation, hulling and shelling operation and processing operation that markets the product world-wide. 90% of the almonds that get processed at the Vann Brothers hulling and shelling facility are grown in their own orchard. The Vann family started growing dryland wheat and row crops in the 1980’s and 90’s and planted their first almond orchard in 1997. From that year on, almonds have become more important with more almonds getting planted every year. Fast forward to 2018 and Vann Brothers now has 13,000 acres of almonds and they have a little over 1000 acres of walnuts in addition to their row cropping operation.

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Blake Vann joined the family business 10 years ago and has since worked in every facet of the business. In the late 2000’s, an outside management company was managing part of the orchard, which was subsequently taken back over by the Vann family. Since then, the operation has expanded at a rapid rate which has seen an average of 1000 acres of almonds getting planted every year for the last 7 years. Blake comments: “Putting together the management teams to take care of that rapid growth isn’t an easy task; there have been growing pains involved.”

Connecting the workforce

Vann Brothers have been using Agworld since 2014 and it was the implementation phase that really required a change of mindset according to Blake and he goes on to explain how the past mentality of not doing something, simply because that’s what everyone is used to, had to change to get everyone on the same page. Blake: “On the ranch, we are now constantly evaluating if there is a better way to do it and Agworld is obviously the better way to do it for us. In the beginning some guys were fighting the change, but I think that right now, they don’t even remember the old way of doing things anymore.” 15 people across Vann Brothers currently use Agworld and they can see exactly what has been done where. Blake: “To have all this critical information, like re-entry periods for example, available in one place and visible to all, is very important to us”

Due to the steep growth curve in the past 7 years, Vann Brothers hired another 6 managers to help Blake manage the day-to-day operations of the orchard. It is now up to Blake, the orchard manager, the assistant orchard manager, three field supervisors and two spray crews to make sure all the work gets done. Blake remarks: “One of the issues that we’ve had in the past through all of the growth is, when guys don’t have to communicate and work together there’s a lot of blaming going around. We actually do weekly meetings where we put all
of our supervisors in one room and we talk about what’s going on around the orchard. However, when we’re not having those meetings, which is every other day, we’re still able to see what everyone’s doing through the visibility of jobs etc. that Agworld offers us."

Using data in day-to-day orchard management

All Vann Brother’s third party and in-house PCAs write their work orders and recommendations through Agworld, so Agworld has a record of everything that has been applied to the fields. Agworld is also used by Vann Brothers to complete their mandatory pesticide usage reports. Blake adds to this: "Having the backup history of what you’ve sprayed in previous seasons is invaluable. To be able to look at the history and see what you’ve done out there helps you make decisions as you go ahead."

Whilst the almond orchard and other farming activities require year-round work and attention, it is almond harvest time that sees the ranches change into a hive of activity. Vann Brothers has three different varieties of almond trees planted and once all three varieties are ready, the trees get mechanically shaken, sweepers move the almonds into windrows and, once dry, they get transported to the hulling and shelling facility. At the same time the almonds are getting harvested, the trees are forming buds for next year’s crop, so keeping stress for the trees to a minimum is essential; so exact watering applications have to take place immediately after harvesting is finished and the nuts are out of the way.

Blake explains how Agworld helps him keep track of all essential activities during these stressful periods: “It’s difficult to keep everything organized when we get really busy during harvest; there’s so much going on at the same time and that is where Agworld helps out.” It’s not only harvest time though when Blake relies on Agworld: “You’re bouncing from ranch to ranch all the time; sometimes you’ll look down and you’ll see weeds, or if you find disease or something you’re wondering what happened, what’s the deal? On Agworld, you’re able to click on a map, select a field and you’re able to view your application history and see everything you’ve done for that orchard up to that point”.

**Connected workforce**

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“ You’ve got to know where you’ve been, to know where you’re going.”

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Vann Brothers has a focus on high quality outputs and therefore often has higher input costs than is average across the industry. Because of the high quality product they deliver and the food safety standards they stand for, Vann Brothers is able to export their product to a multitude of countries and they also boast the Unilever Sustainability Certification. Blake explains: “This is our niche as a company, we’re very much centered around food safety and we put a lot of time into the quality and the safety of the food that we do provide.”

In order to maintain this reputation for quality in the future, Vann Brothers put a high importance on strategically analyzing data from past seasons and using the insights from this data to make decisions going forward. Blake: “It’s nice at the end of the year to be able to look across the fields as a management group and see what we did where, what worked and what didn’t, and really be able to look at the decisions we made and see if that’s something we want to apply going forward or whether we need to re-evaluate some of our strategies. Information is everything but these days there is too much information in Ag and it’s about having the right information to make decisions. To be able to look at our historic information in Agworld and see what we’ve done out there helps me make decisions as we move forward.”

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