Agriculture is one of the largest industries in California. The Golden State has the land, water and sunshine and 70,000 farms and ranches to lead the nation in agricultural business. Agriculture is a $32 billion a year business in California which generates $100bn in related economic activity.

What is not so well known is that over 150 farmer-owned co-operatives play one of the largest roles in California’s agriculture. Milk is the largest agricultural product in California accounting for about $5bn a year. 85 per cent of the state’s milk flows through dairy co-operatives. Agricultural co-operatives play a major role in half of the top 20 California crops.

Agricultural co-operatives began in California about the same time the state was founded in 1850. The California Wool Growers Association was founded in 1860 and is still today the voice of the sheep industry. Many types of co-ops were begun in the late 1800s by the grange (a fraternal rural organisation) to give farmers a unified say in negotiating shipping contracts with the railroad barons.

Initially unique to California was the idea of organising co-ops around the marketing of a single commodity. That concept, called the “California Plan” was formulated under the guidance of a young dynamic lawyer named Aaron Sapiro (1884-1959). He revolutionised agriculture with the single commodity co-op and it still is the main form of agricultural co-ops in California and western Canada. Many farmer co-ops in California owe their existence to Aaron Sapiro.

Co-op shoppers in Britain will know many of the brand names of California’s agricultural co-operatives but may not know that they are actually co-ops. Let’s look at four of the better known names:

- **Sun-Maid** is one of the most recognisable brands in the supermarket, and is the largest marketer and processor of raisins in the world.
- **Sunsweet** is the most popular brand of prune juice in America and they ship 40,000 containers a day all around the world. Because of their market power Sunsweet are also shifting the wording from prune to dried plum.
- **Sunkist** has become the most famous name worldwide associated with fresh oranges and other citrus fruits. There are 6,000 farmer members in California and Arizona who own the largest fruit co-op in the world. Sunkist exports about 40 per cent of its citrus crop. Sunkist has also done a great job in licensing its name for various products.
- **Blue Diamond Growers** is the world’s largest tree nut processing and marketing company. Founded in 1910, Blue Diamond led the members to become the world leader in the industry. Headquartered in Sacramento, California, Blue Diamond has 3000 California almond grower members. Almonds are California’s largest food export by dollar volume, and the sixth largest U.S. food export.

**Important**

The 150 plus co-ops in California play large roles in almost all of the major California crops. Whether it is cotton or cattle, lemons or lambs, California’s co-operatives are an important economic enterprise in the Golden State. Two other co-ops worth mentioning are:

- **Farmer’s rice co-operative**, which is the largest exporter of rice from California most if it to Asia. FRC handles almost 25 per cent of the total California crop.
- **Pacific Coast Producers** is the largest co-op in the US canning fruits, vegetables and juices and the second largest fruit processor in California. From its six facilities in California PCP is one of the major suppliers of private label canned and packaged goods to the supermarket industry. PCP packs for over 50 different US food retailers.

To support, promote and protect co-operatives, the Agricultural council of California was founded in 1919. There is one unique connection between California’s agriculture, Lancashire and the co-op. In May, Governor Schwarzenegger appointed Rayne Thompson to be the Deputy Director for legislation and policy for the California Department of Food and Agriculture. Rayne is from a Lancashire co-op family. She is a niece of this Blackpool-born author and daughter of his brother Philip. Rayne began her professional career lobbying for British co-operatives as an intern with the Co-op Parliamentary Office in London. She learned a lot working under former MP, John Tilley. From there she became Director of Government Affairs for the Agricultural Council of California (the lobbying arm of California’s agricultural co-operatives). So the daughter of a Lancastrian co-operator is now at the fulcrum of California’s agricultural policy.