



Don't expect to see carrots on Thanksgiving menus in the Cuyama Valley, where residents and small farmers have been boycotting Bolthouse Farms and Grimmway Farms over their outsized water use. They're still not welcome at the table.

Back in September, I [wrote](#) about the carrot boycott and the hardball tactics by those big growers that had led to this fight. The water war spilled into the mainstream media this week thanks to an excellent [pair](#) of [stories](#) by Ian James, who covers water and the environment for the Los Angeles Times, as well as by Ari Plachta at the Sacramento Bee [a few weeks earlier](#).

As a refresher: Cuyama Valley is groundwater dependent, which makes it a helluva place for two Big Ag carrot growers that produce 80% of the country's carrots. Together they pumped more than 28,000-acre feet of water last year—65% of the valley's total pumping and about as much as the city of Santa Barbara uses annually. They worked for years with residents and stakeholders to create a groundwater sustainability plan—as required under the state's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act—but at the end of the process they sued anyway, in what residents say is a water grab. Hence [the boycott](#) against Bunny-Luv, Cal-Organic, and other brands.

You may have noticed a new twist in recent coverage: Bolthouse Farms and Grimmway Farms say it no longer makes sense for them to be plaintiffs so they've decided to drop out of the lawsuit. So it's all good now, right? No. The companies that lease farmland to the two

growers are going forward with the case. The adjudication is very much still happening, so the boycott is still on.

“The lawsuit is proceeding and the first court hearing is set for January 2024,” the boycott organizers said in a statement this week. “The lawsuit itself has not been dropped and the remaining plaintiffs are companies that lease land to Bolthouse and Grimmway. These plaintiffs are believed to be owned by the Grimm and Bolthouse families,” [the social media post reads](#).

Even though Bolthouse *Farms* asked to be dismissed from the case, Bolthouse *Land Company* aka Bolthouse *Properties* is still a plaintiff. What’s the difference? Bolthouse Farms says they are an “unrelated third-party company under completely different and unrelated ownership.” It’s true that Bolthouse sold off the farming operation to a private equity firm years ago. Bolthouse Properties is now the landowner that leases the land to Bolthouse Farms. But they have deep ties and aligned interests. Both the farming operation and the real estate operation are based in Bakersfield and are the legacy of the Bolthouse family. The former VP and General Counsel of Bolthouse Farms is the President of Bolthouse Properties. Both entities were represented by the same lawyer whose address is (wait for it) Bolthouse Drive, according to [the complaint](#). You get the point.

It’s a similar situation for Grimmway Farms, which still insists that the “adjudication process is the proper vehicle” for establishing groundwater rights and yet it’s decided to drop out of the lawsuit too. Like Bolthouse, that’s easy to say because its landlords remain plaintiffs. “Moving forward, we feel it more appropriate for the landowners to continue this discussion,” they said in [a statement](#) to the LA Times. Landowners typically hold the water rights, so it’s not exactly surprising that those are the corporate entities that would remain a plaintiff in the groundwater adjudication. Whether it’s a public relations move as the boycott was getting more press, or the typical legal machinations of complex groundwater litigation, who knows.

It is ironic that the distant, private-equity owned farms are the ones issuing statements about being good neighbors, while the local landowners are still suing their mom-and-pop neighbors and their small, rural school district. If you’re curious about the values of Bolthouse Properties, the real estate company defines its mission as “to bring glory and honor to the Lord through our work, our relationships, and our business transactions,” according to its [website](#). They go on to say that “God’s Word as contained in His Inspired Scriptures is our final authority in our relationships with employees, suppliers, tenants, clients and ministry partners.”

The bottom line here is that the reality for the defendants in Cuyama Valley remains unchanged. What does it matter to the small rancher, olive farmer, or organic grape grower which corporate entity dropped from the lawsuit and which remains as the named plaintiff? The groundwater adjudication—launched by all those corporate entities as a group—is still costing them legal fees and threatening their water rights. Thanks to [a new groundwater law called AB 779](#), which UCLA Law students helped draft and pass, the process hopefully won't be so onerous for residents in future groundwater adjudications.

As for the Thanksgiving table, this week's media coverage of Cuyama included some real "news you can use." [Here are several options from KCRW's Good Food](#) for farmers market carrots that are far tastier than the mass-produced nubbins sold by Big Carrot.