

Posted on Thu, Jan. 24, 2008

## Greening sours Florida's citrus growers

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FORT PIERCE --

Florida's days of boom crops of citrus may be in the past, at least until the industry overcomes one its worst challenges so far: citrus greening.

That was the message of University of Florida agricultural economist Allen Morris, who spoke to about 250 citrus growers and others at the annual Citrus Seminar held this year near Fort Pierce.

Florida growers may not produce the amount of oranges they have in the past, Morris said, "which points to the seriousness of this whole greening thing."

Greening is a tree disease harmless to humans but catastrophic to trees.

The estimates discussed this week are based on the Florida Department of Citrus' 10-year average fruit yield-per-tree and on the best information available today, including anecdotal reports and future assumptions about the spread of the disease. Morris cautioned that in some years crops could be considerably higher or lower.

According to one of Morris' charts, growers who are unable to fight the tree disease could expect to see virtually no fruit to harvest six years from now.

In one scenario, a grove yielding 379 boxes of fruit per acre now, even with replanting and attempts to control the spread of the disease, can expect to see increased tree attrition and could see trees yield an average of 300 to 350 boxes per acre.

Meanwhile, production costs are projected to go up \$378 an acre just for greening protection, mostly chemicals to kill the insect that spreads the disease. Those costs may be higher if the grower is also taking measures to protect trees from another disease, citrus canker.

"I think we are realizing this problem of greening could be more serious than we thought it was six months ago," Morris said during a break in the two-day meeting. But an increasing number of growers are becoming committed to trying to control it, he said.

The problem with projections is that there are no hard numbers.

Unlike the decade-long citrus eradication program where every tree the state cut down was recorded, nobody is tracking, statewide, how many greening-infected trees have been cut down and burned.

Statewide, growers have cut and burned hundreds of thousands of commercial trees.

Greening control will be a challenge, Morris said, "but there is no other alternative but to try to control it."

Not controlling it ultimately will lead to the destruction of the grove, he said.

A hurdle hampering the control of citrus greening, growers said during discussions Thursday, is the proliferation of abandoned groves that can harbor the disease and feed the psyllids that carry the greening to uninfected trees.

Though there has been a lot of discussion, so far neither the industry nor the state or federal government has come up with a way to entice owners of abandoned groves to destroy them.

This year's crop is an estimated 168 million boxes of oranges, 25 million boxes of grapefruit and 6.1 million boxes of tangerines and other specialty fruit with a total value to the growers of about \$1.2 billion. The total value of citrus to the state's economy is about \$9 billion.