Mexico, U.S. join in fight against citrus disease

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(March 9, 9:50 a.m.) VISALIA, Calif. — U.S. and Mexican agricultural officials are coordinating an effort to eliminate the Asian citrus psyllid, the pest that can carry the deadly bacterial citrus greening disease huanglongbing.

The odds of winning the fight highlighted a luncheon discussion during the 2009 Citrus Showcase, presented March 5 by California Citrus Mutual, Exeter.

Keeping the psyllid and the disease at bay is as important to Mexico as it is to California, said Javier Trujillo, general director of SENASICA, the branch of Mexico’s department of agriculture that oversees phytosanitary issues.

“Citrus is Mexico’s No. 1 agricultural commodity,” he said. “We have 1.2 million acres of citrus groves in Mexico.”

Psyllids are present in all of Mexico’s 23 citrus growing states, Trujillo said, but the disease has not been present in any of the trapped insects and has not been detected in any of the country’s citrus groves.

Rebecca Bech, administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said the USDA considers the fight against the psyllid and the disease a top priority, but that the federal agency has limited resources due to the recession.

The cooperation of the Mexican government has been critical to the efforts, she said.

“We have to take a more global view of the HLB problem,” Bech said. “We have to fight it on all fronts.”

The California citrus industry went on full alert last summer when psyllids were trapped just across the border in Tijuana, Baja California. Federal inspectors from Mexico and the U.S. increased trapping and detection efforts.

“The state department of food and agriculture immediately launched an intensive and coordinated trapping and survey program on our side of the border,” said John Connell, director of plant health and pest prevention services for the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

The reason the state was so well prepared, he said, was that Ted Batkin, president of the Citrus Research Board, Visalia, Calif., and Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual, approached the state agency two years earlier and urged that a precautionary plan be put in place.

“We knew that the disease had wiped out 139,000 acres of citrus in Florida, and we didn’t want that tragedy to be repeated in California,” Nelsen said.

After the discoveries in Tijuana, psyllids were trapped in two California border counties, San Diego and Imperial. All but two of the finds were in residential neighborhoods, Connell said.
"At all of the sites where the psyllids were found, we treated a 400-meter radius around those sites,” he said, “and there have been no new trappings."

Residents of San Diego and Imperial counties have responded positively to the citrus industry’s public outreach campaign, Batkin said. Field workers have been welcomed into yards where potential host trees are planted.

“We found the homeowners are more in love with their citrus trees than the citrus industry,” Batkin said. "Many of them are emotionally attached to their trees and become alarmed when they learn a diseased tree would have to be removed.

In southern California, there is at least one citrus tree in the yards of 25% of the homes, Connell said.

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