



Concerns about greening growing but manageable

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Citrus greening, also known as huanglongbing or HLB, spread by the Asian citrus psyllid, is a growing concern for U.S. growers.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture regulation recently updated the quarantined areas to help contain the disease.

Approximately 900 of the 28,000 citrus acres in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas are affected by the quarantine, which is only about 3%, according to Ray Prewitt, president of Texas Citrus Mutual, Mission, Texas.

Prewitt said the area affected is actually even smaller than that, because some groves are no longer in existence.

So far, there are only two orchards, right across the road from each other, where the disease has been found, according to Prewitt.

The disease has also been found in two private yards. The locations are all within the quarantined area.

However, Prewitt is proud to say that all known infected trees have been removed.

"The general picture is that we feel fortunate," Prewitt said.

The danger is still there, however, no matter how manageable the disease is for now. There are some concerns, still unconfirmed, that psyllids have spread to other areas.

"It's just a really tricky disease," Prewitt said.

Several measures are being taken to fight the disease, he said.

"We're planning on initiating some treatments in those areas as soon as we can," he said.

A meeting is planned for November 13 that will help educate growers about a dormant spray program.

"The purpose of that meeting is to update the industry on what we know about the disease and get growers to improve effectiveness of control," Prewitt said.

Biological control

Another tactic is the release of up to 50,000 *Tamarixia radiata*, a natural enemy of the psyllid, per month, which is a future goal of the biological control program.

"We're looking to use that method in organic operations, abandoned groves and backyards, because it's difficult to use in commercial citrus orchards where there are normal, ongoing pesticide programs," Prewitt said.

Prewitt is hopeful the program will reach this stage in a few months.

Additional costs, regulations

One of the major effects from the disease will be the added cost to growers.

"As part of the fallout, the federal government is not paying for these treatments. They are paid for by the growers," Prewitt said.

Still, growers are actively participating in the efforts.

"It's a small amount, but it's still here, so we're working proactively," said Trent Bishop, vice president of sales of Lone Star Citrus Growers, Mission, Texas.

Bishop mentioned a lot of things are happening behind the scenes, and that a lot of resources are being spent to try to fight the spread of the disease.

"It's not something we are taking lightly here," he said.

Lawrence Hawkins, spokesman for the USDA, said that growers could begin to notice the effects of HLB even without a widespread outbreak because agriculture quarantines restrict the movement of plants and citrus.

"Growers may be impacted by regulations related to the disease even before there is a noticeable change in the tree productivity in areas where the disease has been only recently confirmed," Hawkins said in an e-mail.

Other long-term effects for Texas could include quality issues with the fruit, he said.

"Citrus greening reduces the quantity and quality of citrus fruits, eventually rendering infected trees useless," Lawrence said in an e-mail.

"In areas of the world affected by citrus greening the average productive lifespan of citrus trees has dropped from 50 or more years to 15 or less," he said.

According to Lawrence, infected trees usually die within five years, but an infected tree produces fruit that is unsuitable for market anyway, all of which could affect the price and availability of fruit for consumers.

Some areas of the country are in more serious stages of the disease, and Texas growers remain positive this season will be a successful one. Every possible effort is being taken to prevent any of those long term effects from impacting their industry, Prewitt said.

"We're in a much better place than Florida where the disease spread widely before they realized it was there," Prewitt said.

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