

## Record crowd attends California Citrus Mutual Showcase

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Don Schrack



VISALIA, Calif. — More than 800 growers and citrus industry representatives at the 2013 California Citrus Mutual Showcase heard about the ongoing battle against the Asian citrus psyllid — and it's not been cheap.

“This is becoming a very, very expensive proposition,” Nick Hill, chairman of the California Citrus Pest and Disease Prevention Committee, told a standing room only workshop at the Showcase March 7.

The psyllid can carry huanglongbing (HLB), also known as citrus greening disease.

Growers and handlers are contributing more than \$15 million annually with another \$11 million coming from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Positive citrus news came from Greg Calistro, director of produce and floral for Save Mart Supermarkets and the event's keynote speaker. Calistro said citrus continues to be a strong fresh produce category for retailers.

“Nationally, citrus is No. 8, but starting October 2012 to date, citrus is No. 3 at Save Mart,” he said. “Limes are our biggest (citrus) opportunity in retail, but the supply is not consistent.”

Marketing research conducted about and for the Modesto, Calif.-based chain, Calistro said, also found:

The economy remains a concern in California — especially in the San Joaquin Valley — and is not coming back as rapidly as the rest of the country;

Organic produce sales are growing at 20% a year;

Online sellers are becoming strong competition to brick-and-mortar stores;

Coupon use is up 12%, and the average basket for shoppers using coupons has doubled;

Social media is “on fire;” and,

Sales of convenience items are up 20%.

“That tells us a customer even on a budget will spend the money for a convenient product that tastes good,” Calistro said.

On the psyllid battlefield, an industry/state/federal taskforce remains committed to keeping the pest contained to Southern California.

“So far, we've been pretty successful with that strategy,” said Robert Leavitt, director of plant health and pest prevention services for the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

Joining the arsenal of insecticides later this year will be a parasitic wasp that kills psyllid nymphs. Populations of the wasp are being grown at California Polytechnic University-Pomona.

To date, no cure has been developed for huanglongbing, but combinations of insecticides have been effective against the pest, said Beth Grafton-Cardwell, director of the Lindcove Research & Extension Center.

Such applications “can be very, very effective in terms of knocking the psyllids down so low that you



Calistro

don't find them for many months, if not for years," she said.

The key is to act quickly and aggressively and to coordinate the applications with other groves in an 800-meter radius.

"When groups agree on an area-wide program and act to suppress the psyllid, they can make a huge dent in the population," Grafton-Cardwell said.

Still somewhat vulnerable, however, are organic groves.

Some approved applications do work, Grafton-Cardwell said, "but they must be applied every 10 days to two weeks, and growers are not seeing very good control."

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