

WEB EXTRA: Q&A with Mike Sparks of Florida Citrus Mutual

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By Doug Ohlemeier, *The Packer*

Florida's citrus growers this summer plan to prepare for another challenging fall production.

SPARKS

Mike Sparks recently completed his first year as head of Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest citrus grower organization. The Lakeland-based group also hosted its third big yearly industry convention in June.

A former Florida Department of Citrus staffer, Sparks, 55, has more than three decades of experience in the citrus belt. At the agency charged with marketing the state's biggest crop, Sparks worked in a number of areas, including finance and accounting, and market and scientific research, and served as deputy executive director and interim director.

Sparks has a bachelor of arts degree in accounting and a master's degree in public administration from the University of South Florida in Tampa.

He and his wife, Esther, who have been married for more than 30 years, live in Tampa's Temple Terrace area and have two children. Son Robert is a Tampa area lawyer and daughter Shane Messer is a Tallahassee, Fla., lobbyist in the health care industry.

Q: You just completed your first successful year as Florida Citrus Mutual's executive vice president, and the organization in June finished its third industry convention, which saw a record attendance of 422. What do you think is the state of the Florida citrus industry?

A: I think overall the Florida citrus industry is certainly encouraged, and we're optimistic about next year's crop. We have survived the recent years of the hurricanes that were literally devastating to the Florida citrus industry.

We anticipate next year's total crop will be substantially greater than the last couple of years. And, in total, if you include oranges, grapefruit and specialty fruit, we could very well have approximately 200 million boxes. That's nowhere close to any records, but it's certainly directionally a positive for Florida citrus growers.

Q: Weather experts again this year are predicting another busy year of hurricanes and tropical storms. What are your thoughts on hurricanes and how they could affect the industry?

A: That is another black cloud hanging out there. Certainly, Florida citrus growers have experience with hurricanes. There's nothing you can do with a direct hit as hurricanes have hit us (in 2004 and 2005). Hurricanes are a part of our livelihood and part of our life.

Certainly, we don't want to wish any other area any bad luck, but hopefully, Mother Nature will give us a nice shake and hurricanes will miss our citrus-producing areas.

Q: How problematic could the citrus greening disease become to the Florida citrus industry? How prepared is the industry to deal with it?

A: Preliminary indications suggest it may be even more devastating than citrus canker.

As devastating as canker is, we believe we have the protocols and controls in place so we can implement canker suppression vs. a canker eradication program. There is a way we can move forward with the canker suppression program. Unfortunately, we don't know that to be a fact with greening. There are things a grower can do. They're costly. Quite honestly, his very grove -- not only the crop, but also his actual trees -- are at stake.

There will be more surveying to look for early detection of greening. Each step of the way will require more grower involvement and, honestly, more costs to the grower. We survived the freezes, we survived the hurricanes and we survived canker. But for those growers that will put the investment back in the groves, no doubt they will reap the financial rewards of that effort. It will be another huge effort by the Florida citrus industry to survive.

Q: Overall, fresh citrus remains a small part of the state's industry. What future do fresh shipments have?

A: Even though it is a smaller part of our crop, fresh is so important.

It really showcases our product at retail. It has a beautiful halo effect on our juice product. We walk hand in hand. Last year, we had some very nice-looking quality fresh fruit. We are anticipating next season's crop to be the same. The whole issue on canker becomes even more important.

Again, the citrus growers are ready and harvesters and the packinghouses all understand the canker suppression program. Everyone here is set for another year where they can participate in USDA's quality control program. There are markets in the U.S. where we can provide consumers fresh fruit, and there are still opportunities internationally.

We are optimistic about our fresh fruit as well as juice for next year.

Q: What do you like to do for fun?

A: I do take a break on the weekend and actually enjoy fishing in the Tampa bay area. I like to get out in the boat often. If I'm not chasing down the citrus industry, I'm chasing down a snook, a redfish or a trout.

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