

Time Is Running Out To Save Citrus Crop

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As of presstime, USDA has released four crop forecasts for the 2013-2014 season. The initial crop forecast, which was delayed due to the government shutdown, showed an initial orange outlook of 125 million boxes, below the final 2012-2013 orange crop of 133.6 million boxes. Observations included in the initial forecast were that the current crop was characterized by small fruit size and larger than normal premature fruit drop. These observations led to concerns that 2013-2014 might be a replay of the 2012-2013 season in which USDA successively reduced

the day of reckoning that many plant pathologists have warned about may have arrived. Most Florida growers have abandoned the scout and eradication of greening symptomatic trees in favor of the enhanced foliar nutrition approach. Enhanced foliar nutrition management showed promise on two fronts. First, tree numbers were not adversely affected as infected trees were allowed to remain in production. Second, fruit yields did not decline as precipitously as some scientists had warned. The smaller crop of 2012-2013 followed by the current crop provides evidence that the naysayers of enhanced foliar nutrition may be right.

Failing To Produce

Although some industry leaders agonize over declining orange juice consumption, the big problem facing the industry today is how to produce oranges. Consumption is declining because production is declining; consumers cannot consume what is not



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All hands on deck needed as fruit yields dip further into danger zone.

its Florida orange crop estimate from an October 2012 forecast of 154 million boxes to a final estimate of 133.6 million boxes.

Problems Running Deeper

In the December, the orange crop estimate was reduced to 121 million boxes, and in January, the crop estimate was reduced again to 115 million boxes. Again, small fruit size and high premature fruit drop were the two reasons provided for the crop size reduction. Despite a cold snap in early January, weather has been favorable. It appears citrus greening is the likely culprit for the smaller crop. It also appears

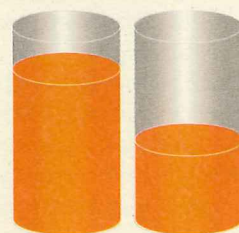


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produced. The decline in production is a product of both declining yields and the failure of the industry to plant new trees. The bearing tree population continues to decline. While some might argue it is economic folly to develop new orchards when confronted with a devastating disease such as citrus greening, the failure to plant new trees means that tree numbers will continue to decline.

As the Florida orange crop approaches levels last seen after the devastating freezes of the 1980s, it's clear that citrus greening is the largest threat ever faced by industry. It will require a partnership of private and public institutions including the University of Florida and the USDA to find solutions and find them soon. **FE**

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