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Officials keep watch for dreaded citrus pest in south Valley

Published: September 19, 2013

By Robert Rodriguez — The Fresno Bee

With the recent discovery of dozens of a dreaded citrus pest in Tulare County, farmers, county officials and a state senator urged the public on Tuesday to watch for signs of the bug on their trees.

The Asian citrus psyllid -- a tiny bug that measures about 1/16th to 1/8th of an inch — has the potential to carry a deadly plant disease known as citrus greening or huanglongbing. While the disease has not surfaced in the region, several young citrus trees in a Dinuba neighborhood were infested with the bug last week.

It was the largest known find of the pest in the Valley, alarming citrus farmers and elected officials.

"This could be a death sentence to our citrus industry and the jobs it brings to our Valley," said state Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford. "This could devastate our \$2 billion-a-year business."

Vidak was joined Tuesday by Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual; Les Wright, Fresno County agriculture commissioner; and Tom Tucker, assistant agriculture commissioner in Tulare County.

The officials reminded the public that they too play a role in helping to prevent the spread of the psyllid, for the sake of their trees and everyone else's. The disease that the psyllid can carry can be lethal to a citrus tree.

Florida has lost about 50 percent of its citrus acres to diseases, including huanglongbing.

"This pest is hungry and it likes to feed on backyard trees as well as commercial ones," said Wright. "This isn't just a citrus industry issue."

Wright and others advised the public to take a close look at their trees for any sign of the bug or the disease, and to report anything unusual to county agriculture commissioners or the California Department of Food and Agriculture hotline.

Experts also said it was important to buy citrus trees from local and certified commercial nurseries.

County agriculture officials say that 500 insect traps have been placed around the area of the finds and are being checked daily. So far, no more bugs have been discovered and tests on the psyllids have found no evidence of the disease.

Still, officials are not resting easy.

"No, we have not completely relaxed and we won't for a while," Tucker said. "But to not find any more is good news."

Citrus farmer Nick Hill said the most recent find hit too close to home. Hill has citrus trees in the Dinuba area.

"It was a shock to know it is right down the street from me," said Hill, who is also chairman of the Citrus Pest & Disease Prevention Program. "But had it not been for the traps, we would not have found the psyllids, so it also shows that the program we have in place is working."

[Back to Top](#)
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[Next Story >](#)

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