

# Saving the Citrus Industry

By Eileen Mattei

The 500,000 backyard citrus trees in the Rio Grande Valley represent the biggest problem facing the Rio Grande Valley's citrus industry as it tackles the devastating disease known as citrus greening. The annual farm-gate value of the Valley's citrus crop is \$72 million. Associated businesses -- packers, shippers, implement and crop care suppliers -- bring the industry's overall economic contribution to the region to \$134 million

"If we go by Florida's experience since 2004, 100% of their citrus has been infected" with citrus greening, said Texas AgriLife economist Luis Ribera. Production there is down by 40% for several reasons. The projected reduction in Valley production of 4% a year "could have a huge economic impact here."

The Asian citrus psyllid insect, which carries the bacterial disease known as HLB or citrus greening, has been found primarily in the Valley's residential citrus trees from Mission and Edinburg on the west and north to Harlingen on the east. While commercial groves have conscientious plans that cover watering, fertilizing and general tree health, backyard

trees across the community rarely do. That makes them more vulnerable hosts for the psyllid. Infected trees produce misshapen, sour fruit. Most commercial groves border residential areas filled with backyard citrus. And psyllid in Mexico's citrus trees are only a strong south wind away.

Last summer, citrus industry leaders from California, Florida and Texas requested a greater sense of urgency in the fight against HLB. The USDA in December formed a multi-agency coordinating group (MAC). With the future of the citrus industry at stake, citrus growers and researchers met this spring in Weslaco, home of TAMU-Kingsville's Citrus Center and TAMU AgriLife Research Center, to discuss ongoing efforts to deter, delay and, in the long term, recover from the fatal disease.

Currently the USDA has \$125 million allocated to fight citrus greening over the next five years. "This is unprecedented, that so much has been designated for one particular disease of one particular crop," said Mary Palm, MAC leader and assistant director for USDA-APHIS Plant Protection and Quarantine. The initial financial support is being directed at the most promising and close-to-field-ready solutions to combat HLB. "Everybody is so totally motivated to try to find promising ideas that would help move efforts forward," she said. "Working together is what is going to make the industry sustainable."

The emphasis is on applied research and a common sense approach to the problem, said Dale Murden of the agricultural research facility Rio Farms and chairman of the Citrus Disease and Pest Management Corporation. He likened the local, grower-driven industry self-help program to the boll weevil eradication program. "We are buying time until we have a solution."

Among the tools gaining ground in Texas is bio-control. Small projects with tree owners are under way using a tiny parasitic wasp that lays its eggs in the psyllid. AgriLife Extension, in fact, has enlisted volunteers, including participants in its Master Gardeners program, to run bio-control projects that tent infected backyard

*Dale Murden of the research facility Rio Farms and Mary Palm of the USDA talked to citrus growers and researchers about developments in the critical battle against citrus greening, which has already decreased Florida's citrus production by 4% per year. (VBR)*



trees and release the predator wasp. They have seen success in reducing the psyllid population. The short-term goal is to grow and release 500,000 wasps per month. Ninety RV parks have been surveyed for the insects.

Palm said success in Texas would come in early identification of the disease/insect and in slowing the spread of HLB. Florida has been trying thermotherapy, which involves



*Turning out platters of grapefruit, like this one from Granny Clare's, will become more difficult as the Asian psyllid threatens the Valley's citrus production. (VBR)*



We are your



for all your business and personal insurance needs including...



**Commercial**  
Bonds  
Home  
Auto  
Life  
Health

**Call Us!**

5801 N 10th, Ste. 300  
McAllen, TX 78504  
**686-3888**  
www.shepins.com

**Let us be your Trusted Choice!**

tenting the infected trees for 48 hours and raising the temperature to 120 degrees. After that, although the tree is not cured, the levels of bacteria in the trees are remaining very low for as long as three years.

Some researchers are looking for effective antimicrobials that will help keep the disease in check. One scenario has one or two large groves using Best Management Practices, testing and removing infected trees and applying for experimental use permits for specific chemical uses not yet registered for citrus.

Weslaco plant pathology researcher Erik Mirkov is working on citrus rootstock resistant to the HLB, which is considered the long-term path to sustaining the citrus industry. Genetically improved and citrus greening resistant cultivars could allow growers to rebuild their groves. Meanwhile, residential trees are expected to dwindle as the trees become non-productive.

See [hidalgo.agrilife.org](http://hidalgo.agrilife.org).



Erik Mirkov of TAMU AgriLife Research has been working on a transgenic citrus rootstock which is resistant to citrus greening. New rootstock will most likely be needed to replace citrus trees killed by the HLB bacteria carried by the Asian psyllid. (VBR)

### Protect Your Backyard Citrus

Water your trees at the drip line at least every two weeks.

Fertilize in the spring and fall, never in the summer.

Prune only November to January.

Inspect trees every two months for psyllids.

Call AgriLife Extension Services, 383-1026, for assistance in identifying psyllids and the treatments that have been approved to kill the bug at different stages.



**Burton McCumber & Cortez, L.L.P.**  
Certified Public Accounts & Management Consultants

## Fraud & Forensic Accounting Services

- ◆ Accounting Fraud Investigations
- ◆ Internal Controls Consulting
- ◆ Loss Risk Mitigation
- ◆ Certified Public Accountants
- ◆ Certified Fraud Examiners
- ◆ Certified Internal Controls Auditors



Ricky Longoria, CPA, CFE  
205 Pecan Blvd  
McAllen, Texas  
956-618-2300  
rlongoria@bmcctexas.com

Ben Pena, CPA, CFE  
1950 Paredes Line Rd  
Brownsville, Texas  
956-542-2553  
bpena@bmcctexas.com

[www.bmctexas.com](http://www.bmctexas.com)

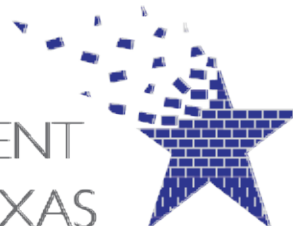
# Are you renting business space and ready to move into your own building?

**We specialize in SBA commercial real estate financing to assist small businesses.**

**Health Care \* General Warehouses \* Office Buildings  
Manufacturing \* Wholesalers \* Cold Storage  
(Purchase land, new construction, buy existing building, renovate)**

**- Typically only 10% down  
- 20-year, fixed rate (presently 5.19%)**

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT FUND of TEXAS  
A Non-Profit Since 1982



(956) 546-4020  
[www.bdfsoftexas.com](http://www.bdfsoftexas.com)  
dalaniz@bdfsoftexas.com  
2335 Central Blvd.  
Brownsville, TX 78520