

UF/IFAS part of team to receive \$9 million USDA citrus greening grant

Filed under [Agriculture](#), [Business](#), [Florida](#), [Research](#) on Tuesday, October 2, 2012.

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The Citrus Research and Development Foundation, a [University of Florida](#) direct-support organization, will receive a \$9 million federal grant to try to prevent the insect that transmits citrus greening from spreading the disease.

UF [Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences](#) researchers will receive about \$1 million of that research funding over five years, said Jack Payne, UF senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources.

Payne said the funding represents much-needed financial help for UF/IFAS researchers battling the disease, first detected in Florida in 2005.

“Citrus greening represents a devastating burden on this state’s economy and we’re working around the clock to help,” he said. “The USDA’s announcement Monday is wonderful news, and we greatly appreciate the efforts of Jackie Burns of UF/IFAS and Harold Browning of CRDF and everyone else who made this happen.”

Citrus greening, known to scientists as huanglongbing, or HLB, was discovered in a backyard citrus tree in Los Angeles earlier this year and now threatens California’s citrus industry.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced the grant Monday as part of a \$101 million funding package to support America’s specialty crops producers, who provide fruits, vegetables, nuts and other foods for millions of meals each day.

Greening has cost Florida’s economy an estimated \$3.63 billion in lost revenues since 2006 and poses a huge threat to the state’s \$9 billion citrus industry, the nation’s largest. It weakens and eventually kills infected trees. For now, there is no cure, although growers are using cultural management strategies to keep groves productive.

Burns, director of UF’s Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred, said Tuesday morning that scientists will use the money, part of a five-year grant, to find a way to eliminate the Asian citrus psyllid’s ability to vector, or transmit, the bacterium that causes citrus greening. The tiny invasive insect is the only known vector for the disease.

Researchers hope to produce an Asian citrus psyllid biologically incapable of carrying or passing on the greening bacterium, either by pinpointing a natural mutation or through genetic engineering, Burns said. The insect could then be reared in laboratories and released to mate with wild psyllids, ensuring that the no-transmission trait would spread.

UF/IFAS researchers have dedicated much time and effort to finding effective control strategies for the disease and its vector. The funds will go to the CRDF, also in Lake Alfred, a direct-support organization of UF aimed at eliminating greening.

Browning, chief operating officer of the CRDF, said the new funding represents a novel approach to citrus greening research that “complements very well the work UF and other institutions, including the CRDF, are doing to help solve the problem.”

Formed in May 2009, the CRDF is a nonprofit corporation set up to manage and provide oversight for funds raised to bolster research to aid the citrus industry. The CRDF’s 13-member

board of directors is made up of representatives from the citrus industry, academia and government. Its mission is to advance disease and production research and product development activities to ensure the survival and competitiveness of Florida's citrus growers through innovation.

The funds are being awarded through the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, part of the USDA's 2008 Farm Bill.

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