

The Cavalry Has Arrived



By Rick Dantzer

As I write this, I am returning from the International HLB conference in Riverside, California. I was blown away by the number and quality of scientists who are working on solving HLB, but the trip began ominously.

On the flight out, the woman next to me was crowding into my space. This was bad enough with five hours of airtime ahead of me, but then she started drinking jiggers of Jack Daniels, buying two at a time. The plane took off at 6:35 in the morning, so she was starting early.

Then she passed out, slumping onto the shoulder of her friend. Thirty minutes later, she awoke and proceeded to become sick to her stomach all the way to Los Angeles. There were no other seats on the plane, so I had to tough it out.

This conference was the largest gathering of scientists around one topic in the history of science. By my count, there were 125 speakers and workshops, with Florida very well represented. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Agricultural Research Service and Florida private sector scientists all had prominent roles.

When it was my turn to speak, I explained why it's important that we find a cure for HLB. I shared a wonderful autobiographical story Peter McClure recently told when he was inducted into the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame. I tried to make the point that citrus is not just a business but a way of life, and that researchers aren't working to save *an* industry, but *the* industry, the one that has given Florida its identity for more than 100 years.

I discussed how important it is for citrus to stay profitable because when a grove owner is forced to quit, the land usually becomes filled with rooftops. The next stop for citrus acreage that is no longer farmed is usually development. With 1,000 people moving to Florida every day, we need to save every agricultural acre we can.

I then explained the political situation we are facing as we seek research funding. This includes how legislators and other funders are insisting that our research get out of the lab or greenhouse and into the field.

I closed by saying the Citrus Research and Development Foundation would continue its march toward trees with greening resistance or tolerance, fund research that focuses on squeezing more and better fruit from greening-infected trees and participate in programs that help growers get new trees in the ground. I explained why we are placing an emphasis on applied research instead of basic research.

As the conference ended, I felt confident we are getting closer to the day when the existential threat of HLB is in the rearview mirror. With this much money and scientific horsepower attacking the problem, it is just a matter of time when we eliminate it or learn to live with it well enough that all good citrus growers can grow a profitable crop. Indeed, the cavalry has arrived.

And the airplane gods smiled upon me on the way home. The seat next to me was the only empty one on the plane.

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