

Freeing the Ox From the Ditch



By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

“The ox is in the ditch,” a Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) board member told me. “Growers need help now!”

Indeed, they do. I know it has been a tough year. Thankfully, prices have rebounded some, but with drop taking its toll and fruit quality on the edge, this has been a trying time.

My optimism for the industry is high, though, and here is why:

First, the CRDF board just approved the best request for proposals (RFP) since I have been here. RFPs are how we fund most research, and this one hits the mark. And if we don't get satisfactory proposals to answer the questions growers need answered, the board has authorized CRDF staff to pull together research teams to get the proposals we need, or even draft the proposals and put the services out to bid. This is a paradigm shift for CRDF, but one which is warranted considering the urgency of things.

Second, reforms needed in plant breeding have been identified and are being addressed. I am confident that from this point on, any plant improvement project CRDF funds will include replicated trial designs and data collection requirements that will result in a disciplined, systematic and successful march toward HLB-tolerant and resistant rootstocks and scions. A practical benefit is that the data created along the way will be of sufficient quality and quantity that growers can take it to the bank. Look for more on this in future columns.

Third, CRDF is pushing as hard as it can on peptide research, which we have identified as an area ripe with possibilities to assist growers. Our first goal is to determine which peptides work. Next, of those that work, what modality (spray, tree injection, citrus tristeza virus transfer or transgenic) is required. Let's not rule anything out because of costs at this point. The important thing is to identify *if* it works and then *how* it works. Finally, we will identify what can we do to assist in commercialization of peptides that require regulatory approval. I am convinced that peptides will become part of many successful horticultural practices over time.

Fourth, because it perceived a lack of scientific rigor in last-stage field trials of promising new rootstocks and scions, CRDF took it upon itself to do testing. It's not a decision that was made lightly because CRDF is primarily a research funding entity, but we thought the need was so great that we had no choice. And frankly, a model where breeders breed and an independent third party does the testing is not a bad model because it eliminates potential conflicts of interest. Indeed, this is how some other commodities do it.

Where this goes remains to be seen, but all the debate in the CRDF Select Committee on Plant Improvement about this might have the effect of bringing additional resources — including perhaps from CRDF — to plant breeding programs. This is good because the Florida citrus industry deserves and needs the best programs possible.



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