

This Beautiful Land

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

In early October I traveled to Visalia, California, to attend the California Citrus Research Board's (CRB) annual research conference. From the plane's window, I saw amber waves of grain give way to orange-topped trees on the crests of deep gorges, which turned back to a checkerboard of crops as I neared my destination.



When I landed in Fresno, the heart of the Central Valley, I found myself in one of the largest, most productive and diverse agricultural areas in our country. I drove through Selma, the "Raisin Capital of the World," then past miles and miles of peaches, plums, nectarines, almonds, chestnuts and table grapes.

And then I hit citrus country and was blown away.

We forget how pretty HLB-free citrus trees can be with their deep green leaves, full canopies and abundant fruit. My "tour guide" was Justin Brown, chairman of CRB, and I marveled at the bounty and number of fresh fruit crops of the area he showed me. The flatness of the ground surprised me, too. Most of the region was as flat as day-old beer.

California is not without its problems. Water scarcity, labor shortages and regulation are among the most serious. But commercial groves are free of HLB, and that makes all the difference.

When I spoke at the conference, I explained the state of Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) projects, progress we are making and our path forward. I made it clear that HLB was our mutual enemy, not one state vs. the other, and that CRDF fully supports California's effort to keep the Asian citrus psyllid (ACP) out of the state's commercial groves. Anything we have learned will be made available to CRB.

Other speakers spoke on themes familiar to Florida growers: the biology of the ACP, early detection, removing HLB-positive trees, quarantines and the need for accelerating citrus breeding. Regarding breeding, there were presentations on developing tools such as CRISPR-Cas9 genetic engineering to facilitate new variety selection.

Hailing Jin made a presentation on the finger lime peptide we've heard so much about and noted that she believes it is possible to make the peptide at a much lower price than it currently costs. That was good news because CRDF bought \$114,000 of the peptide for Megan Dewdney of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to treat trees of fruit-bearing age and it didn't cover many trees.

Casey Creamer of California Citrus Mutual outlined citrus issues at the state and national levels. In some ways, it was a talk that could have applied to Florida, which made me realize how important it is that our states work together.

Thank you, CRB, for the chance to attend the conference and discuss ways we can work together. I'm looking forward to the next steps on the matters we identified. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit.

Sooner or later, Florida trees are going to be HLB-free, and we will again marvel at how beautiful they can be. I'm sure of it.

