

# The Big Reset

By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer



In previous columns, I have shared the “Pathway to a Sustainable Florida Citrus Industry” document. It represents the Citrus Research and Development Foundation’s (CRDF) analysis of where we are in our research and where we believe we should go. It was done for three reasons: 1) to take an honest assessment of where we were, 2) to put down in writing our plan for going forward and 3) to show funders we have a strategy for how we spend our funding.

I had another reason, too. My hope was that the work outlined in the document would create the “Big Reset,” a time when our sick trees would recover enough to get our industry back to where we were before it crashed, perhaps in the 2014–2015 timeframe when production was approximately 100 million boxes of fruit. I believe we can sell this much product, so long as we maintain quality, and that it is enough production to hold the infrastructure of our industry together until a tree comes along that is sufficiently HLB-tolerant or even resistant to sustain us in perpetuity.

So, how can we get production to this level? CRDF is funding research that will provide incremental gains. Strategic use of 2,4-D, gibberellic acid, brassinosteroids, peptides and zinc can reduce drop and/or increase production. Impacts on quality are less certain, but with brassinosteroids and peptides I am confident that we can achieve at least a temporary spike in quality soon after application, enabling growers to calibrate spikes with harvesting. However, I believe it is unlikely that these incremental gains alone will be enough to achieve the Big Reset. That will require a gamechanger, and the only one I see on the short-term horizon is a controversial one: injecting oxytetracycline (OTC).

From the limited data I have seen and the trees I have observed, I believe injecting OTC will work. Novel formulations have increased uptake, injection devices are becoming more precise and less expensive, and the labor costs of injecting will become more bearable as production increases and quality improves. Other caretaking costs — like the number of fertilizer applications — should come down, too.

Are there alternatives, like sufficiently greening-tolerant or even resistant trees in the plant breeding pipeline? Perhaps. The Donaldson tree and others give me hope, but these solutions are still years away, and growers have told me they are out of time and money.

Therefore, CRDF will aggressively fund research on injecting OTC so a smart decision can be made. We will continue meeting with industry partners to seek input and consult with regulators to impress upon them the urgency of our situation and the need for decisions to be made quickly. We will be transparent, open and truthful about our discoveries.

The industry may soon have a big decision to make. The metrics that matter the most — production, acreage and the number of citrus growers — are still going in the wrong direction. Let us not let fear of the unknown dissuade us from bold decisions.



Column sponsored by the Citrus Research and Development Foundation