

Moving Forward

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer



There are those who believe the federal government should deliver the mail, protect the borders and do little more, but most Americans believe the federal government should do significantly more. Political arguments usually revolve around the extent and method of governmental response, not whether the government should be responding at all.

That is what I believe will happen with the federal government's response to Hurricane Ian. Most reasonable folks will understand that a robust response is going to be required. I believe the debate will revolve around such policy questions as construction setbacks on barrier islands or whether some areas should be rebuilt at all, not on the scale of the federal response.

And I fully expect federal policymakers to understand that Florida's citrus industry is going to need assistance in its recovery from the hurricane.

After the damage assessment gets further quantified, those who represent the industry will undoubtedly meet to discuss possible avenues of assistance, develop a plan and begin executing it. So, while at times it does not seem that this industry can catch a break, I predict there will be significant federal help in the offing. That, in addition to new therapies that are either here or soon will be, will get this industry back on its feet.

What are these new therapies? New applications in the use of 2,4-D and gibberellic acid are showing an ability to stick fruit on the tree to reduce drop, create more uniform color break and increase fruit quality, resulting in more, larger and sweeter fruit. And any day now, the Environmental Protection Agency is expected to approve a new peptide product that can be sprayed or injected. The great majority of growers trialing the product have experienced a positive result.

The biggest new therapy on the horizon, of course, is injecting oxytetracycline. In mid-September, a company submitted a Section 24(c) with state regulators and a Section 3 with federal regulators. At the time of this writing, a decision from state regulators was expected in October 2022, and the company is busy ramping up production to meet anticipated demand if approval is forthcoming. This therapy will work and is safe, and the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) is continuing to think through additional research to complement the therapy's effectiveness.

Perhaps most encouraging, plant breeders are nearing fulfillment of the research goal of a breeding solution for HLB. A private company has developed a CRISPR Valencia tree that appears to be HLB-tolerant and will not be considered a genetically modified organism. The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has done the same, and conventionally bred citrus keeps getting more tolerant with each new generation. I get many questions about this, so CRDF and Florida Citrus Mutual likely will be sponsoring an educational session on this topic soon.

Hurricane Ian hurt our industry, but I predict federal assistance will help us recover and your investment in research will soon pay off in big ways.

It is always darkest before the dawn. The sun will rise.



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