

Signs of Hope

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer



Because of the estimate and storm, the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) canceled its October board meeting and met, instead, in executive session to regroup and review our research portfolio. Frankly, the estimate was a gut punch, especially since it did not factor in losses from Hurricane Ian.

First, we reviewed the progress we have made in implementing the “Pathway to a Sustainable Florida Citrus Industry.” This document was CRDF’s attempt to put down on paper what we thought was the best way to get HLB behind us and for the industry to survive until we got there. I’m pleased to report that in the last 18 months, either CRDF or the U.S. Department of Agriculture funded all but one of the research topics listed as needing to be researched. Research on several of the therapies proposed in that document — like new ways to use gibberellic acid, 2,4-D and brassinosteroids — are providing answers. The hurricane put a lot of fruit on the ground, but we believe the research is showing that these therapies are working.

Second, we discussed a possible request for proposals (RFP) that we called “Gamechangers,” an RFP where we would solicit proposals which, if successful, had the potential to save the industry and not just provide incremental benefit. New therapies that provide only incremental benefit are probably not going to cut it until the industry substantially recovers.

Next, we reviewed the budget to see what we had available to provide immediate help to growers if delivering oxytetracycline (bactericide) through a systemic delivery device was approved. We weren’t sure what that assistance would look like, but a discussion is occurring with industry leaders to determine how best to bring growers the assistance of this therapy.

Finally, we discussed the state of CRISPR technology and what has been done to date. While not a short-term fix, it is likely the long-term solution to whipping HLB.

After a great deal of discussion, the Executive Committee, including several board members who weren’t on the committee but who were encouraged to participate nonetheless, decided that our highest priority needed to be to assist growers in getting the bactericide into trees if the state approved its use. We see this as perhaps the only thing that can help reset the industry in the short run and begin the march back to having a far greater critical mass that will restore the infrastructure of the industry. Three days after our meeting, state regulators approved an antimicrobial with the bactericide as the active ingredient to be delivered through a direct delivery device, and a label was issued.

Now that this has been approved, what should CRDF do next from a research standpoint? Will delivering the bactericide in this fashion work just as well with or without psyllid control? Will putting the product into the rootstock instead of the scion help or hurt with phytophthora control? Please share your ideas with us. Let’s capitalize on this opportunity that state regulators have given us.



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