

**N**ew Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) board President Morgan McKenna Porter was born Feb. 29, 1992. There's only a Feb. 29 every fourth year, a leap year. "So," she quipped, "CRDF has a seven-year-old president if we go by my leap year age." Porter succeeded former president Rob Atchley on Jan. 1.

Whether using her leap year age or her real age of 31, she's the youngest president of the organization that primarily funds efforts to cope with or solve HLB, also called greening. CRDF Chief Operating Officer Rick Dantzler sees advantages to that. "She's young, so she has a vested interest in the well-being of this industry," he said. "She isn't afraid to confront controversial issues and is willing to challenge the status quo. I'm really looking forward to her leadership."

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"As a young grower, I hope to have a very long career in the citrus industry," said Porter, who became a CRDF board member in January 2021. She said being on the board, and now president, "allows me to be actively engaged in the direction the research for our industry is headed."

#### WHAT'S NEEDED FOR HLB

Porter said she hopes to lead the CRDF board in identifying research that gives growers immediate help with HLB while working toward the goal of trees with genetic tolerance or resistance. "My main objective is to get CRISPR trees from the greenhouse to a field-testing stage," she said, noting it's imperative to start learning how those trees perform in a commercial

## In The Meantime

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer



I have had more bounce in my step lately because we finally have several HLB therapies which we believe are working. New ways of using gibberellic acid, 2,4-D and brassinosteroids seem to be reducing fruit drop, increasing fruit size, improving fruit quality and minimizing minor blooms. And the biggest potential game changer of them all — inserting oxytetracycline (OTC) into trees with systemic delivery devices — has been approved by state and federal regulators and is in the marketplace. This OTC therapy has the potential to reset the industry, and I predict this is the year we do it. This is the year we turn the corner and begin the march back to sustainability and growth.

So, what do we do in the meantime? What should we do as we implement these therapies? I believe it would be a mistake to not take advantage of the time these therapies will give us until a greening resistant or sufficiently tolerant tree (which we believe will be the long-term solution to HLB) is developed.

I recently attended a conference in Sebring, Florida, with approximately 50 growers on something else we might consider. The conference was on regenerative agriculture, the idea that the secret to profitable agriculture is natural soil health, and that certain farming practices have created "toxicity to deficiency (nutrient)." Another quote from the event: "Complete and balanced nutrition has always been the first line of defense due to the direct involvement of mineral elements in plant protection." Viewing soil as a living system, where microbes feed on carbon in the presence of air and water exchange, is a bedrock principle of regenerative agriculture.

Within the context of HLB and citrus, I made the point that I didn't see how improvements in soil health alone could bring about the magnitude of improvement which the industry needs as quickly as it needs it. Still, it occurred to me that the speakers at the conference were on to something. We should take the time which the therapies mentioned above will provide us to begin working on longer-term improvements, like rebuilding soil health, which will help sustain the industry after these new therapies allow us to reset.

How do we rebuild soil health? Building organic matter was a common theme at the conference, but several other core principles were mentioned: 1) minimize soil disturbance, 2) maximize crop diversity, 3) keep the soil covered and 4) integrate livestock where possible. Growers make a concerted effort to add carbon from sources such as chicken manure and compost. They plant cover crops like brown top millet and radishes in the row middles and underneath tree canopies.

I do not doubt that adding organic matter to Florida's sandy soils will improve fertility and conserve water. Can it make groves profitable in the face of HLB? I have my doubts, but there are numerous growers who believe it can. Regardless, it strikes me as a good idea to start moving that way, in the meantime.



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