

Better Days Ahead

By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer



I recently returned from the International HLB Conference in Riverside, California. Sitting next to me on the flight out was an elderly man who immigrated to the United States in 1961 from the Netherlands. He settled in the Central Valley of California and took a job in the dairy industry, where he spent his career. Back then, in the Central Valley, dairies were commonplace, and citrus groves extended from mountain range to mountain range. Now, the dairies are gone and so is much of the citrus, swallowed up by ever-expanding rooftops to handle an ever-growing population. Sound familiar?

I couldn't help but reflect on this man's life and the period of his career, a time when hard work and playing by the rules nearly always resulted in a comfortable life. That is still true today in most cases, but everything seems like a dogfight anymore.

The years of his career were also the golden age for the Florida citrus industry, which gets me back to the conference.

I enjoyed the keynote addresses most of all. Leandro Pena of Spain told us to view CLAs as a parasite instead of a pathogen, which reshapes our thinking. He also told me privately that we should be killing CLAs and reducing titer and hoping that the tree of the future arrives in time. This is the Citrus Research and Development Foundation's (CRDF) exact research strategy, which was comforting.

Michelle Heck of the U.S. Department of Agriculture explained Grove First™, a research initiative that takes possible therapies straight to the field instead of first proving them in other assays. Other assays have their place, but in Florida we don't have the time that such therapies require.

Michael Knoblauch of Washington State University demonstrated that there is still a great deal to learn about phloem physiology. As we unlock those secrets, therapies will become more efficacious.

Denise Manker spoke about the Bayer research project, the most expensive in CRDF's history. While it was not as successful as we had hoped, a commercial product is taking shape that will help with HLB and canker.

The University of Florida's Ute Albrecht made a compelling case for injecting oxytetracycline (OTC). I have no doubt that this therapy can be the bridge Florida growers need until the tree of the future arrives — if they can hang in long enough for trees to receive the full benefit of the therapy. That's easy for me to say as one who doesn't make his living from producing citrus, but I believe it, nonetheless.

As I told the audience during my remarks, I believe our industry has bottomed out, turned the corner and headed into a period of growth and sustainability. I know grower experience with OTC has been mixed. But as you will see in new data Albrecht will soon release, the therapy is working remarkably well when compared to untreated trees. If we can get through the next two years, a new —albeit less robust — golden age of citrus will be with us again.



Column sponsored by the Citrus Research and Development Foundation