

Deadly Bacteria Decimates Florida Orange Production

TAMARA LUSH, Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — This year's Florida orange crop is approaching the fruit's lowest harvest in decades, and experts say a deadly bacteria that's infecting the trees is to blame.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Wednesday released its citrus production forecast and the news isn't good. The 2013-2014 orange forecast is 110 million boxes, down 4 percent from last month, and 18 percent less than last season's final production figure.

Orange harvesting ends in June, and if the crop doesn't decline further, it will barely exceed the 110.2 million orange boxes harvested in 1989-90 following the worst freeze in Florida citrus history.

Andrew Meadows, a spokesman for the Lakeland-based Florida Citrus Mutual, said that citrus greening disease is the reason for the crop decline.

"We're in the middle of a real battle with citrus greening," he said. "It's putting stress on our trees."

The bacteria, which is spread by an insect, causes trees to produce green, disfigured and bitter fruits by altering nutrient flow to the tree, eventually killing it. It threatens Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry. Growers and scientists suspect that many of Florida's 69 million citrus trees are infected, with some estimates as high as 75 percent.

Greening affects all types of citrus trees, not just oranges.

"Citrus greening is an existential threat to Florida's signature crop, and today's revised crop estimate is evidence that the situation has reached a crisis point," said Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam.

Citrus is big business in Florida. Citrus growers gave Florida 66 percent of the total U.S. market share. About 95 percent of the state's orange crop is used for juice.

Florida's orange crop had \$1.5 billion in sales in 2012, up from \$1.3 billion the previous year. But Meadows said that while higher sales prices are fine in the short term, "upward pressure" on the market is not sustainable in the long term.

The state's citrus growers and agriculture experts are hoping that research will lead to a cure, or at least a way for the tree to live with the disease and still produce tasty fruit.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

"We must continue to invest in research to find a long-term solution, while supporting growers in their efforts to replant lost trees and to battle the invasive pest that spreads this disease," said Putnam

In December, the U.S.D.A. created an "emergency response framework" to battle citrus greening. It will gather various groups, agencies and experts to coordinate and focus federal research on fighting the disease.

The federal agency has spent hundreds of millions on tracking and researching the disease.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/29/2015 - 8:23am):

<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/04/deadly-bacteria-decimates-florida-orange-production>