

Tulare County citrus growers hoping China opens its market

For most of the past eight months, Randy Veeh, and many of his fellow Central Valley navel orange growers weren't greatly concerned about China's decision to stop importing California citrus. That decision came in early May, after rotted oranges reportedly were found in shipments from the state

While the U.S. Department of Agriculture tried to negotiate with China to again receive California citrus, Valencia orange growers in the state lost an estimated \$7.5 million to \$10.5 million, with about half those losses in Tulare County. And China still isn't accepting California citrus.

The dispute began after China reported seven "detections" in February and March of spoiled citrus arriving from California, said Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual, an Exeter-based trade association for the citrus industry.

He said it has never been made clear to U.S. officials if only a few pieces of fruit were rotten or entire boxes. Still, China opted to close its market to all California citrus. "They would argue the bacteria involved in the decay could spread on host materials in China and cause more decay in their production areas," Nelsen said.

Nelsen said the citrus industry agreed to additional chemical treatments of California citrus crops to minimize spoilage and applying chemical coatings at the packing houses to keep bacteria off the fruit if China will reopen its market.

The USDA has approved the agreement, and Nelsen said he expected it to be signed about Thanksgiving time, but Chinese officials are moving slowly. "It has begun to move through the bureaucracy in China, but that hasn't happened yet. So that's frustrating," he said

Growers aren't seeing the price they receive for navels drop yet. Veeh said that could happen by Christmas or early January — if China's market still isn't open — when exports to China usually increase because citrus plays a major role in celebrating the Chinese New Year, which begins Jan. 31.

Source: <http://www.freshplaza.com>, (09/12/2013)