

## Citrus oversupply latest hurdle for Florida growers

Hurricane Irma continues to challenge Florida's citrus industry.

Two growing seasons separated from the September 2017 storm that flooded groves and uprooted citrus trees across the state, the industry has seen production rebound quicker than some anticipated.

But now the problem is an oversupply of citrus because of fruit from other countries, and Florida growers may be forced to allow some of their crops to hit the ground without being harvested.

Juice processors did not expect Florida citrus production to return to the level seen just before Irma and signed three- and five-year supply deals with growers from countries including Mexico and Brazil.

Those contracts have left Florida growers, who had faced more than a decade of declining production, facing a market glut.

"It is dire. This is real," Senate Agriculture Chairman Ben Albritton, R-Wauchula, said this week.

"This will be the season, not the season as in a single season, but a stretch, a season of time, that whoever is going to survive in the citrus business will come out the other end," Albritton said. "And there is going to be a lot of people that don't. And that's a fact."

Hurricane Irma pounded the state from the Keys to Jacksonville and caused major damage in key citrus-growing areas. The hurricane came as industry officials were starting to express cautious optimism after a decade of seeing production numbers decrease because of issues such as citrus-greening disease, development pressure and changes in drinking habits.



In October, the U.S. Department of Agriculture forecast that the 2019-2020 growing season, which will run until July, will have a 3.3 percent increase in production from the past season.

The forecast indicates orange production would be up 64 percent from the storm-ravaged 2017-2018 season, with grapefruit production up 18.6 percent in the same time.

“Directionally, we’re going in the right direction. Unfortunately, there is a long way to go,” Michael Sparks, executive vice president and CEO of Florida Citrus Mutual, said Wednesday.

Sparks estimated that to maintain the industry, from growers to the processing plants and fresh fruit houses, annual production will need to grow by about 35 percent.

But first, Albritton, a citrus grower who has served as chairman of the Florida Citrus Commission, estimated 13 percent to 16 percent of the production in the current growing season could be left unharvested, and there is the potential that up to 27 percent could be unharvested next year.

Albritton suggested the need for a special advertising campaign for the industry that exceeds the available revenue collected from farmers for marketing.

“It all boils down to this, where is the money going to come from to produce that kind of marketing, that is going to move the needle in this media market today, which is incredibly expensive,” Albritton said. “To throw \$20 million at a marketing scenario today, in this media market it’s inconsequential.”

An increase in what is known as a “box” tax that growers pay has also been proposed to the Florida Citrus Commission. The commission is expected to discuss the issue on Nov. 20.

In a statement Wednesday, Florida Department of Citrus Executive Director Shannon Shepp said the “conservative” approach the agency has had to take the last several years is changing.



“The industry has come together and invested time and energy into ensuring the department is on track for future success,” Shepp said in the statement. “It’s possible the box tax could increase but we are also exploring ways to intensify programs at the current tax levels. There is no doubt that we have a challenge ahead of us, but with that, we also see great opportunity to return to the role we were always meant to fill.”

Albritton said he will push for funding in next year’s state budget.

State lawmakers have relied on the Department of Citrus to market the industry, while allocating \$18 million for citrus-greening research in the current fiscal year.

Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried has asked state lawmakers in next year’s budget to include \$8 million for citrus research projects, \$7.4 million for citrus health and fighting pests and diseases and \$2.5 million to support the Citrus Inspection Trust Fund.

Sen. Doug Broxson, R-Gulf Breeze, pointed to a difference between the Senate and House in funding state marketing programs.

“I’m very disappointed that we have not allocated enough money to do a 911 about our citrus industry, where we could tap into those monies that we spent the last 10 to 15 years to tell people about who Florida is and our overall product, not only tourism, but things like our citrus economy,” Broxson said. “Hopefully, we will again have a dialogue between the House and the Senate where we realize that we have to do our part in making sure that we keep this economy moving, in all times, good times and bad times.”

Albritton said any marketing campaign needs to offset dietary trends where bloggers can simply proclaim “drinking orange juice is no different than having a doughnut.”

“That is really difficult to defend against,” Albritton said.

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