

Tiny pest a big worry for citrus growers

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

In addition to the drought, something else has been on

the minds of California citrus growers — a tiny insect that threatens the industry.

The four-year drought has been a challenge, said Kevin

Severns, general manager of the Orange Cove-Sanger Citrus Association.

"The industry lost 15K acres over the past three years

due to the drought. But we have had a good year so far with the rain and snowfall," he said.

"We are not water hogs," Severns said.

But Severns said the tiny Asian citrus psyllid has growers worried as much as the water supply.

"It is a winged insect that is similar in size to an aphid or smaller so it's hard to see unless you know what you are looking for," he said. "It has been in California since 2008."

The pest can carry Huanglongbing (HLB), a disease that could wipe out the citrus industry. It infects the tree by feeding on it, similar to the way a mosquito infects humans with malaria."

The good news is almost every place in California has tested negative for the disease. A \$25 million state program — funded by grower assessments — helps educate homeowners who have citrus trees in their backyards to report anything suspicious.

Severns said the other frustrating concern is that a tree can be infected several years before it tests positive for the disease.

"HLB is in every citrus growing area of Florida," he said. "The state's production



Courtesy of Orange Cove-Sanger Citrus Association

Kevin Severns, general manager of Orange Cove-Sanger Citrus Association, says the tiny Asian citrus psyllid is causing more concern among California citrus growers than the drought.

is in free-fall because of the disease and is now less than 40 percent of what it once was."

In an effort to combat the disease, the USDA is using a little wasp imported from Pakistan.

Over 270,000 acres are planted to citrus in California, and 80 percent of the crop is consumed domestically, he said.

Growers are happy with the export markets, Severns said. California sends citrus to Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong

and, surprisingly, China, the biggest citrus producer in the world.

"We are better equipped with our infrastructure and farming practices than China and we have a better product," he said. "We are fortunate to have a unique climate that nurtures fruit with brilliant flavors. No place in the world can grow the quality of lemons due to dry, hot summers and cool, wet winters."

"In many respects, California is the Promised Land," he said. "But, there are some dark clouds gathering and we have to protect what we have."

Orange Cove-Sanger Citrus Association is a cooperative citrus packing house in Fresno County, Calif.

The cooperative is owned by more than 50 producers who market their citrus crops through Sunkist Growers Inc.

The current association was formed in 1973 by the consolidation of the Orange Cove Citrus Association, which was founded in 1916, and Sanger Citrus Association, founded in 1920.

It currently serves more than 4,300 member acres in Fresno, Kern, Madera and Tulare counties and packs and sells navel, Valencia and Cara Cara oranges and Minneola tangelos.

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