

People & Places

Growers feel the squeeze as citrus industry drops

By **DAVE BERMAN**
AND **WAYNE T. PRICE**
Florida Today



Malcolm Denmark/Florida Today via AP

Steve Crisafulli examines a tree in a USDA test grove on North Merritt Island, Fla. The grove has four or five varieties of citrus trees with 10 different root stocks to see how they do. The citrus industry has been hit hard by canker, greening and the weather.

MERRITT ISLAND, Fla. (AP) — From a 2-acre plot on north Merritt Island, Steve Crisafulli looks at rows of orange trees, searching for a glimmer of hope for Brevard’s dying citrus industry.

Crisafulli — a Merritt Island resident whose last name has been synonymous with the citrus business for five generations — has given over this small grove on his family’s land for a U.S. Department of Agriculture experiment that he prays will unlock the secret of a more disease-resistant orange tree.

The test grove contains about five different varieties of citrus trees planted in combination with about 10 different root stocks. The goal is to determine which combinations work best.

The Crisafullis view the USDA project as perhaps the last-ditch effort to stem the painful, long-term downturn of the citrus industry. Citrus production in Florida has dropped 59 percent since the 2008-09 season.

Production plunged even more in Brevard County, by 87 percent. And, recently, two of the area’s last traditional citrus retailers — Harvey’s Groves stores in Rockledge and West Melbourne and the Policicchio Groves retail store on north Merritt Island — announced they will not open their stands for the 2017-18

season. The companies will keep operating their mail order businesses.

For some, the closing of these iconic roadside attractions is a bittersweet reminder of an older Brevard, a sleeper community before the rumble of rockets, when citrus was king and a muck-free, crystal-clear Indian River teemed with sea trout and manatees. Sorting warehouses dominated the landscape on U.S. 1, and trucks filled with pungent fruit plied the roads.

Now, some of those warehouses are crumbling derelicts, as diseases like canker and citrus greening — and hurricanes — have hit the industry hard. Many growers decided it was more lucrative to sell their groves to developers to transform them into residential subdivisions, rather than continue growing or-

anges or grapefruits.

And a looming question is where to buy the renowned orange and grapefruit juice that only comes from Indian River-grown fruit?

Indian River citrus has always been world-renowned for its quality and still is, albeit with a deeply declining production — if you can find it.

Even longtime local citrus growers like Crisafulli and Frank Sullivan of Cocoa say their families now buy their orange juice at the grocery store. But it’s not nearly the same as the fresh-squeezed juice.

“None of it really measures up,” Sullivan said.

Crisafulli agrees.

“Nothing is as good as the real thing,” he said with a grin.

Thinking about the citrus industry’s downturn, Crisafulli says: “I think it’s sad, because it’s an identity not just for Brevard, but the entire state.”

“Along the river, on both sides of the river, and certainly all of Merritt Island, was nothing but citrus groves,” Sullivan said. “There were 9,000 acres of citrus inside NASA,” referring to the sprawling federal reserve that is home to the Kennedy Space Center.

That land was “some of the best growing land in the state” for citrus, Sullivan said.

The downturn didn’t happen suddenly. Florida citrus production peaked in 1997-98, when 304.45 million boxes of oranges, grapefruits and other citrus were produced. By 2016-17, that figure dropped 74 percent to 78.13 million boxes. The latest projection for the current

2017-18 season puts expected production at 54.65 million boxes. Each box would weigh 85 to 95 pounds, depending on the type of fruit.

Sullivan, who is in the third-generation of his family in the citrus business, traces the local industry’s problems back even further — to the devastating freezes of the 1980s.

“That took a lot of citrus out. Then, there was the disease,” said Sullivan, who no longer grows citrus, but continues to operate the Sullivan Victory Groves citrus mail order business on U.S. 1 in Cocoa.

Sullivan and other citrus mail order businesses in the region coordinate their purchase of citrus for resale from a handful of remaining local growers, including one in Scottsmeer.

“It facilitates buying the best fruit” that’s available at any particular time, said Sullivan, who also is a former Canaveral Port Authority commissioner. “We go wherever we can get it.”

This is a peak season for the mail order business, as many people want fresh fruit ahead of the holidays.

Even with the thinning of the citrus industry in Florida, Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Fort Pierce-based Indian River Citrus League, said he is hopeful growers in Brevard will make a resurgence in producing oranges and grapefruit on the Space Coast.

FFA, Les Schwab, Wilco team up to collect 510,000 pounds of food

As the holiday season descends upon us, most people get to over-indulge in creamy mashed potatoes, savory turkey, and delectable desserts.

But for many Oregonians, the holidays are more famine than feast as numerous residents struggle to provide food for themselves and their families.

Since 2008, the Oregon Food Bank has seen demand for emergency food boxes increase by 40 percent. It is for that reason agriculture students across Oregon want to help feed those that need it most.

In the spirit of the holiday season, the Oregon FFA partnered with Les Schwab Tire Centers, Wilco Co-op, Capital Press and the East Oregonian newspaper to help combat hunger. The initial goal of raising 250,000 pounds of food in 2015 seemed daunting but the more than 6,000 FFA members from over 100 chapters and Les Schwab Tire Centers across Oregon made great strides to help provide the Oregon Food Bank and other local food pantries with much needed food.

This year the Drive Away



Courtesy of Oregon FFA Foundation

Oregon FFA members worked with Les Schwab, Wilco Co-op, Capital Press and the East Oregonian newspaper to collect food for those in need.

Hunger Event collected over 510,150 pounds of food, double the original goal, and enough to provide more than 380,000 meals. Over the past three years, the event has raised over 1.5 million pounds of food for those suffering from food insecurity, enough food to help nearly 3,500 Oregon families for more than a month.

The efforts to collect the food were as diverse as the communities themselves.

In Adrian, students gleaned farm fields after harvest to collect much needed produce as

well as held a class competition, all of which helped collect over 7 tons of food. Some chapters focused on working with local farmers, like Jefferson FFA, who partnered with Case Farms, which donated more than 20,000 pounds of winter squash.

Other chapters, like Canby FFA, hit the streets and went door-to-door dropping off collection bags in a trick or treat for cans.

In Prineville, where Les Schwab Tires first began, the FFA chapter raised a crop of potatoes and was able to do-

nate over 9,000 pounds to the local food banks.

“The FFA thanks all the farmers, community members and everyone who brought food, donated time and helped give to this effort,” remarked Kevin White, executive director of the Oregon FFA Foundation.

In addition to local chapter efforts, people were encouraged to drop food off at any local Les Schwab store, and collection bags were distributed by the Capital Press, the East Oregonian, Hermiston Herald, Blue Mountain Eagle,

and the Willamette Falls.

Bags were also available at Oregon Les Schwab and Wilco locations. Most of the food will be distributed by the Oregon Food Bank network and end up back in the communities in which it was raised.

This is a very special project for the Oregon FFA, where members were given the chance to embody the FFA motto of “...learning to do, doing to learn, earning to live and living to serve. In this hunger initiative, FFA members set an example of service leadership,” said White. “It is essential for these young people to have a partner like Les Schwab. Les Schwab employees have, for decades, served as role models to our members by serving their communities and neighbors.”

The Oregon FFA is part of the National FFA Organization and is a national youth organization of 653,359 student members — all preparing for leadership and careers in the science, business and technology of agriculture. There are 8,568 local FFA chapters in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

Monsanto asks Arkansas judge to halt state’s herbicide ban

By **ANDREW DEMILLO**
Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — A major agribusiness company asked an Arkansas judge Friday to halt the state’s plan to ban an herbicide that’s drawn complaints from farmers across several states who say the weed killer has drifted onto their fields and caused widespread damage.

Monsanto asked a Pulaski County judge to strike down the rule approved by the state Plant Board earlier this month that would prohibit the use of

dicamba from April 16 through Oct. 31. The ban is expected to go before a legislative panel next month, but the Missouri-based company said action is needed now because farmers are already buying their products for next year’s growing season.

“The ban severely curtails Monsanto’s ability to sell its new dicamba-tolerant seed and low-volatility dicamba herbicide within the state, and every day the ban remains in place costs Monsanto sales and customers,” the company said in its filing.

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Agriculture declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Dicamba has been around for decades, but problems arose over the past couple of years as farmers began to use it on soybean and cotton fields where they planted new seeds engineered to be resistant to the herbicide. Because it can easily evaporate after being applied, the chemical sometimes settles on neighboring fields. The state earlier this year approved a temporary ban on the herbicide’s sale and use, and has re-

ceived nearly 1,000 complaints about dicamba this year.

The request to halt next year’s ban was added to a lawsuit Monsanto filed last month over the board’s decision in 2016 to prohibit the use of dicamba.

In its amended lawsuit filed Friday, the company argued the Plant Board exceeded its authority by banning dicamba and did not consider the financial impact on the state’s farmers. Monsanto said it would ask the court to move quickly on its complaint, and hoped the board would join in that request.

“This is all about having the newest technology available to growers so they can choose what products they wish to use to combat those difficult-to-control weeds,” said Scott Partridge, the company’s vice president of global strategy. “There’s no reason to delay.”

The company also challenged the makeup of the 18-member board, arguing a state law that gives private groups such as the state Seed Growers Association power to appoint members violates Arkansas’ constitution.

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Tuesday Nov. 28

Developing or Expanding Your Farm Stand or Agritourism Operation. 5-8 p.m. OSU Extension, Auditorium, SOREC, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. A-4-class

series on the subject begins Nov. 28. Sign up for one class or all four: Nov. 28 is Understanding Regulations and Licenses for Farm Stands. Website: <http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarms>

Tuesday-Friday Nov. 28-Dec. 1

Oregon Water Resources Congress Annual Conference. Best Western Hood River Inn, 1108 E Marina Drive, Hood River, Ore. Website: <https://owrc.org/>

Wednesday, Nov. 29

Establishing Equitable Leases

Wednesday-Thursday Nov. 29-30

Oregon Board of Agriculture Meeting. 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Food Innovation Center, 1207 NW Naito Parkway, Portland, Ore. On day one, the board will receive a presentation on developing a statewide brand to promote and identify Oregon food and agricultural products and a briefing on a recently completed report on cano-

la research in the Willamette Valley. Board members will also select individuals to represent agriculture on the Oregon Agriculture Heritage Program and the Oregon Coordinating Council on Ocean Acidification and Hypoxia. The afternoon includes tours of the Port of Portland and a cannabis production operation. On day two, the board will hear a discussion of “cap and invest” carbon-dioxide reduction efforts that address greenhouse gas emissions and provide opportunities for agriculture. Kristen Sheeran, Gov. Kate Brown’s carbon policy advisor, and Jenny Lester Moffitt, deputy secretary of the California Department

of Food and Agriculture, will lead the discussion. Public comment periods are 10:15 a.m. on day one and 9:15 a.m. on day two. Website: <http://bit.ly/2cKsbhX>

Wednesday-Friday Nov. 29-Dec. 1

Farm Fair and Tradeshow. Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center, 1705 E. Airport Road, Hermiston, Ore. Local and regional agriculture-related businesses will display their services and products both inside and outside the center. There will be many sessions on topics important to farmers and ranchers. Website: hemistonchamber.com

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Index

Markets 12
Opinion 6

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