

# Valley citrus growers learn about latest research to fight pest, disease

By Robert Rodriguez



Central San Joaquin Valley growers continue to be threatened by the Asian citrus psyllid, a tiny gnat-size pest that can carry a disease deadly to citrus trees. State ag researchers are monitoring the advance of the pest. GOSIA WOZNIACKA — Associated Press

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- California citrus growers are learning from Florida about how to battle the Asian citrus psyllid and the disease it can carry, huanglongbing.
- Specially trained dogs could serve as early detection tools to spot huanglongbing in a citrus grove.
- Citrus industry officials want to make the public and legislators more aware of the role the industry plays in the state with two new outreach campaigns, Citrus Strong and Citrus Matters.



Specially trained dogs, heat therapy and nutrient cocktails are among the methods being used by farmers worldwide

to slow the spread of a deadly citrus disease, several growers and experts said at Thursday's annual Citrus Showcase in Visalia.

The event, organized by the California Citrus Mutual and Citrus Research Board, brought growers and others in the citrus industry up to speed on several issues, including disease research, government regulations and water policy.

Several farmers and scientists, who recently attended an international citrus conference in Florida, updated farmers on the efforts to suppress the Asian citrus psyllid and the plant-killing disease it can carry, huanglongbing.

MaryLou Polek, vice president of the Citrus Research Board, said the disease is one of the most serious threats facing California's \$2 billion citrus industry. Tens of millions of dollars have been spent on stopping the bug and killing the disease that has no known cure.

The disease has ravaged Florida's orange industry, where the bug and disease are rampant. Scientists have been studying the problem for years. California has only one case of the disease, a citrus tree in Southern California, but multiple psyllids have been found in the central San Joaquin Valley's citrus belt.

"So far, there is no magic bullet or cure," Polek said. "And there may not be just one solution, but a toolbox of solutions."

Citrus research board member and citrus farmer Jack Williams said farmers in Florida and Brazil are giving their trees extra nutrients to help combat the disease. The results have been mixed, and young trees appear to respond better than mature ones to the nutrient cocktails. The therapy can be expensive.

Growers in Florida also are experimenting with thermal therapy — the application of heat to the base of the tree as a way to slow the spread of the disease. Heat is applied through steam or hot water fed through plastic tubing wrapped around the trunk of the tree. The downside is that the treatment can damage the tree and it only extends the tree's productivity for six to 18 months before the tree succumbs.

One of the more exciting projects is the use of specially trained dogs, Williams said. The canines are taught to pick up on the plume of volatile organic compounds emitted by diseased trees. The success rate for finding an infected tree is nearly 100%. Ten dogs are being trained.

Also announced at Thursday's conference was a public outreach campaign aimed at raising people's awareness about the disease and the bug. Bayer CropScience, in partnership with California Citrus Mutual, created the Citrus Matters campaign. A website — <http://citrusmatters.bayercropscience.us> — gives consumers information about the importance of the state's citrus industry and the threat the disease poses to people's own citrus trees. Bayer officials also said they will donate \$1 for every tweet on Twitter using the hashtag #citrusmatters to @CaCitrusMutual. The money, up to \$25,000, will be given to Asian citrus psyllid and huanglongbing research.

Also underway is a new lobbying effort by California Citrus Mutual to help legislators, regulators and consumers understand the role the citrus industry plays in the state's economy and as a supplier of a healthy food. The lobbying campaign created by AdFarm is called Citrus Strong and can be found on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/CitrusStrong>, and Twitter, <https://twitter.com/CitrusStrong>.

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