

Contact:

Ray Prewett
Texas Citrus Mutual
ray@valleyag.org
Cell: (956) 458-1616

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Texas Citrus Growers are Cautiously Hopeful that Citrus Greening Disease is Confined to A Small Area

Leaders urge continued diligence in prevention while praising state and federal action to date

(Mission, TX) Reacting swiftly to positive identification of citrus greening disease in a Texas Valencia orange grove, Texas Citrus industry leaders in conjunction with Texas Department of Agriculture, quarantined a 5 mile radius around the grove site and voluntarily suspended the harvesting of fruit. Growers are hoping that the swift action will help prevent the devastation of citrus groves that occurred in Florida when the disease was already widespread by the time it was detected.

As of January 24, 2012, nine (9) trees have been confirmed positive. Initial sampling surveys of the 5 mile radius quarantine by USDA should be completed by Thursday, January 26. As of January 23, 53 of the 138 groves had been tested. It will take several days to complete the testing at the Texas A&M University Kingsville Citrus Center on all of these samples. The five mile quarantine will end on Friday at 5 PM, and it is highly likely that it will be extended. If additional positives outside of the original grove are found, the quarantine boundaries may change.

Citrus greening disease poses no human health threat nor does it impact the consumption quality of fruit but there is no known cure for an infected tree. In areas of the world where citrus greening is endemic, citrus trees decline and die within a few years. The disease is spread by a pin-head sized disease-infected insect known as the Asian citrus psyllid.

“We do not know how long it has been in the Valley but we can hope that it was found before it spread too far,” said Ray Prewett of Texas Citrus Mutual and industry coordinator for industry response. Prewett expressed reluctance to be optimistic, knowing how serious and difficult to contain the disease is. “We do know that the current psyllid population is low, particularly in commercial citrus, but we don’t yet know how widespread this outbreak might be.”

Growers will intensify an area-wide psyllid control program and will work closely with scientists and several state and federal agencies to develop the best strategy for containment. In the meantime,

about 50 percent of the citrus crop in the Rio Grande Valley remains to be harvested and there has been no immediate impact on this year's crop. While crop estimates are down from last year, the lower numbers are due to the freeze in February, 2011 and the drought this past summer. The Texas citrus industry contributes approximately \$150 million to the region's economy and a significant number of jobs.

The Texas Citrus Industry has been preparing for the citrus greening disease for the last few years, working with state and federal agencies to prepare a Citrus Greening Action Plan that was completed and submitted to TDA and APHIS in 2009.

"Recognizing other states and countries have dealt with citrus greening for years, we have trained and prepared for this possibility," Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples said. "The Texas Department of Agriculture and USDA are implementing emergency precautions to mitigate the spread of this disease. TDA is aggressively working with our industry partners to protect our vital citrus industry."

According to Prewett, The Texas citrus industry has been well served by TDA and as well as by USDA APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) inspections that have been ongoing since the Asian Citrus Psyllid was first identified in the U.S. in 1998. It was during a regular APHIS inspection that these trees tested positive for the disease.

"It is a real tribute to growers that their efforts have kept the disease at bay for this long. USDA and the Texas Department of Agriculture have been great partners with the industry to find it before it was even more wide spread before it was detected," said Prewett.

The focus of the coordinated effort of APHIS, TDA, academic scientists, and the industry will be to first determine how widespread the disease is and what steps are necessary to contain its further spread.

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