

Posted on Mon, Dec. 05, 2005

Young citrus growers feel the squeeze

BY MIKE SCHNEIDER

Associated Press

LAKELAND - When Jason Johnson graduates from college this month with a degree in citrus production, chances are he will look for jobs in landscaping rather than the state's \$9 billion citrus industry. It makes better economic sense.

"My roommate and I said we're going to stop farming orange groves and start farming houses," said Johnson, 26, a student at Florida Southern College in Lakeland. "I love the citrus industry. It's part of me. But at the same time . . . you see urbanization coming in. You see the houses coming in, and what do you do? You put plants around them."

Urbanization, hurricanes and diseases are transforming the industry that produces Florida's signature crops, leaving behind a less promising future for the next generation of growers, production managers and citrus marketers. No one predicts its end, but the outlook has gotten more dismal in the past two years for the state's citrus industry, which in recent years has abdicated the title of being Florida's largest crop to greenhouse and nursery plants.

Hurricane Wilma's October rampage took out an estimated 17 percent of this season's crop, a year after three hurricanes reduced the state's citrus production by 42 percent from the previous season. More troubling, the hurricanes spread citrus canker, a dreaded bacterial disease that doesn't harm humans but can cause trees to lose fruit and leaves. An even deadlier citrus disease, greening, surfaced this year in citrus-producing areas of the state already facing development pressures from the northward migration of residents out of heavily populated South Florida.

BLEAK SITUATION

"I don't know if what we're seeing is the worst we've ever seen. Certainly the freezes of the 1980s were bad," said grower Ellis Hunt Jr. of Hunt Bros. "It has been a little bleak."

The current challenges threaten to push more family operations out of the business, leaving behind larger, corporate operations. They also may change the planting cycle for growers who in years past had counted on their trees to produce fruit for decades but may now come to expect their trees to last only 15 years or so as a result of diseases, industry leaders say.

While the number of citrus grove acres has been declining steadily in Florida since the mid-1990s, the amount of fruit produced by the trees in those groves has increased as a result of denser replanting following the freezes of the 1980s.

Florida is the world's top producer of grapefruit, providing more than a quarter of the world's supply. The state also produces 35 to 40 percent of the world's orange juice. The biggest orange juice producer is Brazil.

But the value of Florida citrus took a hit from last year's hurricanes, decreasing last season to \$742.2 million, the lowest in almost 20 years.

Groves in the deep, sandy soil along the southeastern coast and in central Florida are disappearing as real estate becomes pricier and more enticing to home builders, causing even more citrus production to move to the southwest corner of the state where the watery soil is less desirable and land is cheaper.

"The east coast of Florida is in the path of change in regards to development," said Dan Gunter, executive director of the Florida Department of Citrus, which markets and conducts research on citrus.

The development pressure pushing up the price of land along the southeast coast is stark.

AVERAGE LAND VALUE

The average value per acre of orange groves in central Florida was \$6,409 in 2004, according to a study by University of Florida professor John Reynolds. By contrast, the value of agricultural land being converted or likely to be turned into subdivisions or businesses in the counties that are home to Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach ranged from \$36,250 to \$62,500 an acre, depending on their proximity to large populations.

A year ago, grower John D'Albora, of J-V D'Albora Co., sold off the last 1,000 acres of citrus groves that had been in his family for four generations in St. Lucie County, along Florida's southeast coast. The buyers were "land banking," or holding onto the land until it was purchased by developers.

"It was unfortunate, but we had been approached by buyers . . . and finally we said, 'Huh? How much?' " said D'Albora, who wouldn't reveal the price per acre.

In few places are the uncertainties of the industry's future felt more acutely than at the Citrus and Horticultural Science department at Florida Southern, which is the only college or university in the United States to offer a bachelor's degree in citrus.

In the 1980s, the program had about 20 to 25 graduates each year. That number dwindled to about 15 to 20 graduates in the mid-1990s. Only five students will graduate from the program this year, and the college has eliminated a citrus marketing degree because of a lack of students.

Nikki Knowles, who will be one of the last graduates with a citrus marketing major at Florida Southern, said when students ask professors about the future of the industry, they have always been told that, "Citrus always will be here."

She believes that, but whenever she returns to her parents' home in Polk County, "I see groves being pushed up and houses going in places you would never think a house would be," said Knowles, 22.

CHANGING FOCUS

G. Timothy Hurner Jr., director of the Citrus Institute at Florida Southern, said graduates are trained to apply their skills to other areas of horticulture, not just citrus, in order to make them more employable.

"It's hard to deal with an industry that's having difficulties," Hurner said. 'Canker, the greening disease, urban encroachment. Everything is coming down on you. So it's easy to become a prophet of doom and make Chicken Little statements like 'The sky is falling.' "

The industry is not without its little victories. The small crop this season has pushed the price of orange juice futures to a seven-year high. Earlier this year, the Commerce Department issued a preliminary ruling sought by Florida growers ordering penalty tariffs of up to 60 percent on orange juice from Brazil that it says is being sold in the U.S. at unfairly low prices.

Justin Pettit, who also is graduating from Florida Southern this semester with a degree in citrus production, said he too is interviewing with a landscaping company just to be on the safe side.

"It's kind of shaky right now. Everybody is afraid right now," said Pettit, 23. "They don't know what's going to happen in the future, and there are some people who don't know why I'm getting a degree in this."