

Fewer Trees = Smaller Citrus Crops



Despite reports showing citrus acreage continuing to contract, the rate of decline has slowed.

By Thomas H. Spreen

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The Florida Agricultural Statistics Service released the latest Florida commercial citrus tree inventory in late September. The numbers showed another decrease in Florida citrus tree numbers and acres across all major varieties.

Orange tree acres are at 483,418, down 14,777 acres from 2009. The peak in orange tree acres in Florida occurred in 2000 when tree acres stood at 665,529. So there has been a 27% contraction in the Florida orange citrus tree area. The period from the mid-1990s until the arrival of the hurricanes in 2004 is when the Florida citrus industry consistently produced crops exceeding 200 million boxes. Orange tree numbers also declined to 59.6 million bearing and 4.2 million non-bearing trees in 2010. These figures compare to the peak in Florida orange tree numbers of 79.6 million bearing trees in the 1998 tree census, a decrease of 20 million trees over the 12-year period from 1998 to 2010.

Gauging Grapefruit

Grapefruit tree acres are reported at 50,189 acres, down from the peak 146,915 acres in 1994. Grapefruit trees acres are down more than 65%. It is straightforward to see why Florida grapefruit crops barely exceed

20 million boxes in 2009-2010 compared to crops consistently exceeding 50 million boxes in the 1990s. Specialty fruit tree acres now stand at 20,430 compared to 94,459 acres reported in 1972. As grapefruit and specialty citrus comprise a large proportion of fresh shipments, it's clear that the Florida fresh citrus packing industry has experienced a large contraction over the past 15 years.

Taking A Closer Look

The decline in Florida tree acres can be attributed to a number of factors including low grower prices early in the first decade of the 21st century, and the citrus canker eradication that resulted in the eradication of more than 65,000 acres of Florida citrus before it was abandoned on Jan. 1, 2006. The housing boom in Florida combined with the effects of hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 served to encourage some growers to not rehabilitate groves damaged by the storms and/or infected with citrus canker, so the citrus acreage has continued to decline. The change in rules regarding citrus tree nurseries also had an effect as the switch to enclosed tree nurseries limited the number of new trees available in 2006 through 2008.


The Greening Effect

Last, but certainly not least, is the effect of citrus greening. UF/IFAS

recommendations include immediate eradication of any tree exhibiting greening symptoms. Many growers have recently, however, adopted a management strategy of foliar feeding of greening infected trees and are not removing symptomatic trees.

Looking forward, even though citrus tree acres and tree numbers continue to decline, the rate of decline has slowed. The decrease in orange tree numbers was just a little more than one million trees from 2009 to 2010, a much smaller decline compared to five years earlier.

With higher grower prices resulting from smaller crops, it appears the contraction in the Florida citrus industry is nearing its end. New enclosed citrus tree nurseries mean that new tree availability will no longer be a constraining factor.

In terms of future citrus production, the current orange tree population can produce crops in the range of 150 to 155 million boxes in an average year, and future grapefruit crops will be around 20 million boxes. These crops should result in prices that allow most growers to cover their cost of production. Until a solution to citrus greening is found, however, there is no reason to think growers will start a new round of plantings similar to that seen after the freezes of the 1980s. 

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