

# Abandoned groves harbor psyllids, study confirms

For years, citrus growers have feared that abandoned groves provided refuge for the Asian citrus psyllid, the insect that transmits citrus greening. Now, University of Florida

(UF) researchers have confirmed that they were right. A study published in the *Journal of Economic Entomology* shows that the psyllid not only survives in abandoned groves, but that it often travels to commercially active groves nearby, bringing along the bacterium responsible for the disease.

The results underscore the need for landowners to remove or destroy unmanaged trees, said entomologist Lukasz Stelinski, an assistant professor with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and one of the study's authors. "There was very much anecdotal evidence that these abandoned areas are harboring citrus psyllids," Stelinski said. "It's just one of those things that had to be confirmed."

An estimated 140,000 acres of citrus groves go untended in Florida,

according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The state has an estimated 550,000 acres of active groves. Much of the abandoned grove acreage is believed to be owned by developers or investors who expected to clear the land rather than produce citrus, Stelinski said. Consequently, the owners never provided basic management such as pest control.

In the study, Stelinski and colleagues from UF's Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred sprayed non-toxic "marker" chemicals on trees in seven abandoned groves where psyllids might be present. They also placed insect traps in nearby commercially active groves. When the traps were checked, researchers found psyllids bearing the marker chemicals, indicating that the pests had traveled from abandoned groves to active ones. Laboratory analysis revealed that some of these psyllids carried the bacterium that causes greening disease.

Researchers also took leaf samples from citrus trees and found the presence of greening was about the same in abandoned and managed groves.

Other members of the research team were Siddharth Tiwari, Hannah Lewis-Rosenblum and Kirsten Pelz-Stelinski, all with UF's Entomology and Nematology Department.

Stelinski said that as-yet unpublished findings showed the insects could fly up to 1.25 miles in 10 days, and could probably travel farther over time. "So you don't necessarily need to be right next to an abandoned grove to be at risk," he said.

Article provided by the University of Florida-IFAS. 🍊

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