UF/IFAS CITRUS STATE

Engaging with growers

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The new director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) had only two requests when he agreed to a recent campus visit. Both were for citrus to be on the itinerary.

First, Director Scott Angle wanted to hear about HLB. Second, he wanted to hear at least some of it directly from growers, not just University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) researchers.

Scott Angle (left), director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, shakes hands with citrus grower Tom Mitchell (right). The purpose of Angle's visit was to get an update from growers and researchers on the status of HLB in Florida.

KEY MESSAGES

Growers Larry Black, Tom Mitchell and Vic Story answered the call. Their message to Angle was that they're still all in on citrus, and the funding NIFA provides for UF/IFAS research helps keep them all in.

I also invited Mike Sparks of Florida Citrus Mutual to visit with Angle. Mike's message was, of course, the need for continued funding, a message he has carried to NIFA and elsewhere in Washington. But this gave him a chance to do it on his home turf, without suit and tie, with real dirt instead of marble underfoot, and with an experimental citrus grove as a backdrop.

Angle was appointed to his job on Oct. 29. So, his visit to UF in April was just his second on-campus look at NIFA-funded projects. That was no accident. After the farm bill passed on Dec. 20 calling for another $125 million in NIFA HLB research, he was eager to get a realistic picture of the current UF/IFAS research and its implementation in Florida.

Story told Angle that he has experimented with alternative crops such as peaches, but wryly noted, "Georgia's got nothing to fear." The real experiment, he said, is in collaboration with the UF/IFAS Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred.

Story is trying out citrus under protective screen to keep out the psyllids on a part of his grove. Without the collaboration of UF/IFAS and the positive results in production and quality, he said, he wouldn't have the nerve to try it, nor would his lenders and insurers support him.

Black called for more opportunities for stakeholders to engage in citrus science and its funding process. Mitchell echoed that, holding up a page from the Federal Register to make the case for citrus industry appointees to the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board's Specialty Crop Committee.

While Black, Mitchell and Story didn't pull any punches, they were resolute in saying it's worth investing federal research dollars in the future of Florida citrus. Black spoke of fallow land that could go back into production if there's a solution to HLB. Story said investors in land have confidence because they see the difference that growers and NIFA-funded science are making. And Mitchell spoke of how even as the industry shrinks, those who remain are not waiting helplessly for a savior; they're engaged in pursuing solutions.

PROGRAM PRAISE

Angle's not in a position to say what will get funded in the future, but he did say this several times during his visit: "There is no program anywhere in the country better than IFAS in conducting both applied and basic research."

That is, we're simultaneously pursuing responses to HLB that you can implement right now with research that will help keep citrus in business a decade or two down the road.

UF/IFAS scientists gave presentations on efforts to control the psyllid, new HLB-tolerant varieties and more. Angle appeared impressed and asked good questions.

The participation of Black, Mitchell, Story and Sparks was essential. It demonstrated a unified scientific and commodity community, both determined to surmount the greatest challenge they've ever faced in citrus.

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