Damage documentation tips for hurricane season

One of the things I like most about being an Extension agent is getting to work with new growers. Despite all odds, some of these growers are getting into citrus.

With hurricane season underway, it’s good for new growers to know — and for established growers to refresh themselves on — how to prepare before a storm strikes the grove. While there are some great comprehensive guides that have been written by University of Florida Extension agents and research specialists (see Additional Resources sidebar), what I want to focus on is how to efficiently document damages.

Prompt and proper damage documentation is a very important aspect of storm preparation and recovery. While reporting periods will vary depending on your insurance provider, the Farm Service Agency asks that damages be reported within 15 days of the storm to be eligible for federal disaster aid. Immediately after a storm, county Extension agents work closely with state and federal agencies to obtain a picture of agricultural sector damage. Reported damages have a direct effect on the scale of disaster relief.

While risk tolerances will vary between growers, if your grove is within the cone of uncertainty within the 3-day forecast, you stand a good chance of feeling impacts from the storm and should consider starting your documentation procedures.

Begin by taking inventory of your trees. Along with counts, identify which blocks or groves are most economically important so you can prioritize tending to them after the storm. Back up electronic business records on a flash drive and on cloud storage and print copies of your insurance policies along with relevant contact info. Take photographs of equipment, vehicles, infrastructure and trees. Be sure to document representative fruit set.

SPEED UP THE PROCESS WITH DRONES

One way to speed up documenting the state of the grove before and after the storm is with the use of aerial drones. Drones map large sections of a
property by flying a pre-programmed route at a set altitude and automatically taking photographs as they fly. Specialized software then looks at each photo and stitches the images together into a single large image. A single consumer-grade quadcopter drone flying 400 feet above the ground can capture 200 acres of farmland in half an hour. Specialized agricultural drone software can even count trees with a striking degree of accuracy.

Since the route is stored on the software, you can easily produce an image of the grove after the storm that covers the exact same area. These before-and-after photos can greatly speed up the insurance claims process, not only with tree loss but infrastructure damage as well. Since it only takes one pilot to fly the drone, the rest of your workforce can handle other storm preparation procedures.

Drones are also able to get into the grove from a distance if roads are impassible after a storm. As long as you can maintain line of sight and there are no flight restrictions in place, you can check on the grove without having to wait for a helicopter flyover. Keep in mind that there will be more low-flying air traffic than usual following a storm.

Hurricane season can be extremely stressful for new and established growers alike, but by taking proactive steps you can give yourself and your farm the best chance for coming out strong on the other side.

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