



By J. Scott Angle,  
jangle@ufl.edu,  
@IFAS\_VP



A group of agricultural leaders met with University of Florida President Ben Sasse (center).

# Citrus gets Sasse's attention

**C**itrus has the attention of new University of Florida President (UF) Ben Sasse. That bodes well for UF's continued commitment to the industry.

## AG TOUR

It started on June 3, when I took the president on a 28-hour tour of Florida agriculture. It included a stop at the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee, where Sasse met citrus legend Hugh English and industry stalwart Joby Sherrod.

From there we went to the Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Balm, where I introduced him to Florida Citrus Mutual Chief Executive Officer Matt Joyner and other commodity association leaders.

## CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Joyner alone went beyond a handshake and asked for a meeting. Sasse said yes, and Joyner brought five citrus leaders with him to Gainesville later that month.

They had a 40-minute conversation during which Joyner & Co. made the case for the university's continued commitment to citrus. Even after 15 years of HLB disease, the group told Sasse, citrus is still a major Florida agricultural commodity that dwarfs many of the 300 others.

They also asked for Sasse's support for UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) breeding efforts, including those that employ biotechnology as a tool for precision.

Sasse was already somewhat literate in citrus. He knows where the name of the stadium came from. During the tour, Sasse saw his 12-year-old son Breck inject a citrus tree with the same tools used to deliver oxytetracycline. And I put the book "Oranges," by John McPhee, in the president's hands.

But the visit by the Joyner delegation likely strengthened Sasse's understanding of how important a continued investment is in citrus breeding and the need for coordinated efforts among the many scientists at work on all things citrus.

Joyner brought a citrus A-team with him: Kyle Story, president of the Florida Citrus Mutual board; Morgan McKenna Porter, president of the board of the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF);





Breck Sasse, son of University of Florida President Ben Sasse, performs a simulated oxytetracycline injection on a citrus tree during the president's agriculture tour.

Emery Smith of Ben Hill Griffin, Inc.; David Howard of Graves Brothers; and Aaron Himrod of the CRDF board.

### CITRUS SPOTLIGHTED

Sasse did not make any commitments. But by Joyner's account, Sasse listened carefully, asked good questions and took notes. Once the citrus team finished with the president, they visited with me and gave me valuable counsel about the future of citrus breeding, talent acquisition and research funding.

A new president means an opportunity to renew attention to the battle to save citrus. Because of Joyner's advocacy for the industry, Sasse is paying much more attention to citrus than he was before June.

It's encouraging that Sasse got out of Gainesville to come out and meet citrus leaders. It's also encouraging that he granted citrus leaders a meeting on campus.

It starts with an open door. Joyner has spent enough time in DC and Tallahassee to know when to walk through it, who to bring with him and what to say inside.

We're already thinking about a second president's ag tour, possibly as early as this fall. What role citrus might play in a sequel is uncertain. One thing is for sure, though: You've got the president's attention. 🍊

*J. Scott Angle is interim provost of UF. Since 2020, he has served as UF's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of UF/IFAS.*

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7