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New center to accelerate HLB solutions

My job is to help you make money. By changing the way the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) does business in pursuing citrus solutions, I hope to change your business for the better.

We've just launched a UF/IFAS Crop Transformation Center (CTC). It has the potential to speed delivery and improve efficacy of the most promising HLB solution I've seen in 15 years — the use of biotech tools to create a tolerant or resistant tree.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

What makes this citrus initiative different? First, speed.

Citrus industry leaders have been so urgent and insistent about this approach that it went from idea to reality in the space of just a few months. An initiative this major doesn't usually roll out this fast.

I started huddling with citrus leaders over the summer. By early October, I had secured a commitment from UF President Ben Sasse for \$2 million to get the CTC started. The Florida Citrus

Commission has committed another \$2 million. As of this writing, the Citrus Research and Development Foundation has informally pledged support as well.

And I've rechanneled some UF/IFAS money internally to get things started.

A second way the CTC is an evolution in our business approach is the focus on commercialization. Traditionally, we've come up with an idea and then waited and hoped for a private sector investor or company to run with it. Part of the CTC's mission will be to deliver new citrus varieties directly to the marketplace — that is, the company that will put it in your grove.

When I needed a CTC leader, I wanted an academic, yes, but a different kind of professor. I chose Charlie Messina not just because of his Ph.D. and his impressive publication record. I chose him because of his years working in bringing innovation to the marketplace at Corteva Agriscience and DuPont.

A third way the CTC will speed the



Charlie Messina

lab-to-grove innovation pipeline is to work with federal regulators to gain approval of new citrus varieties developed with biotech tools.

And a fourth way the CTC effort stands out is that our biological science leadership will try to coordinate with our social science experts on consumer acceptance. We have the best in the business at measuring public perception and what moves the needle in attitudes toward agriculture. The Center for

Public Issues Education isn't formally a part of the CTC, but we are already approaching it and other UF/IFAS social scientists about how words like transgenics, gene editing, CRISPR and genetic modification land with the folks who buy orange juice in the supermarket.

NO TIME TO WAIT

Part of the reason we've been able to get this off the ground so quickly is that we didn't wait — not for President Sasse, not for human resources and not even for the citrus industry.

Until recently, the industry's concerns over public perception made it wary of genetically modified varieties. But a few months ago, several industry leaders asked me to launch a full-scale approach to gene editing known as CRISPR.

We were ready because we anticipated the need and have been pursuing this for a decade. Professor Nian Wang is the world's foremost expert in CRISPR as applied to citrus. He has knocked out canker in citrus genes, and he's now focused on the more difficult task of finding which genes make a tree susceptible to HLB.

Even before we had funding, we met with facilities people to double the size of Wang's lab. We drew up job descriptions for the biotech scientists we'll hire in Lake Alfred and Gainesville. And we started having internal discussions about who would lead the CTC.

That's a program built for speed without sacrificing precision. We've changed the way we do business to support the way you do business. 🍊

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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