U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Agriculture

Subcommittee on Biotechnology,

Horticulture and Research

Testimony by Mr. Larry Black Regarding Huanglongbing

Thursday, March 9, 2017

2:00 p.m.

My name is Larry Black and I am a fifth-generation citrus grower from Lakeland, Florida. I currently serve as General Manager of Peace River Packing Company. Peace River manages more than 3,300 acres of citrus groves in central Florida. Peace River Packing Company is a fully integrated citrus services company, active in growing, harvesting, fresh fruit packing, and processed fruit sales.

I am also past president of Florida Citrus Mutual and I serve on the Citrus Research and Development Foundation Board.

Huanglongbing (HLB, or citrus greening) is a bacterial disease spread by the Asian citrus psyllid (ACP). HLB has seriously affected citrus production worldwide in Asia, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, Brazil and since 2005, my home state – Florida. The vector – the Asian Citrus Psyllid (ACP) -- and the disease are also found in Texas and California. Although HLB has most severely affected Florida, this is a national citrus crisis.

Throughout history, wherever the disease has appeared, citrus production has been compromised with the loss of millions of trees. It attacks the vascular system of a tree, severely compromising yields, and eventually rendering the tree unproductive. Trees are often dead within three years.

At its 1998 peak, Florida citrus plantings exceeded 850,000 acres and produced 300 million boxes of oranges, grapefruit, and tangerines. We are now down to about 80 million boxes of production and 500,000 acres. Much of the decrease is due to HLB.

Huanglongbing and the Asian Citrus Psyllid are not native to the state of Florida or the United States. Like citrus canker, which has been an ongoing problem for the industry, HLB is another example of an imported pest and disease that has resulted in reduced citrus acreage and fruit production; We have lost packinghouses and juice plants. The processing plants that remain are running below capacity. University of Florida economists have estimated since 2011, HLB has cost our industry $4.5 billion in lost economic activity and 8,257 jobs. Today, Florida Citrus Mutual estimates those losses to be double that amount.

And while yields have dramatically decreased, the cost of growing citrus in this environment has skyrocketed; production costs in Florida total over $2,100 per acre, triple the cost prior to HLB. The “perfect storm” has forced many growers out of business.

The silver lining is despite the tough times, the Florida citrus industry is still a major economic driver for the state of Florida providing an estimated $10.7 billion in annual economic impact. Citrus forms the backbone of many communities throughout the state’s interior. Citrus not only directly supports processing plants and packinghouses but also ancillary businesses such as banks, truck dealerships, plant nutrition companies, restaurants and equipment stores. These businesses would have a hard time surviving if it were not for Florida citrus.

Consequently, the Florida citrus industry, along with the state and federal governments, has made a historic commitment to researching solutions to HLB. Currently, more than 300 research projects designed to beat HLB are underway across the globe. Citrus growers, the state of Florida and the federal government have collectively spent or appropriated more than $250 million over the past six years on research. Half of this investment was provided through the 2014 Farm Bill.

While there is no “silver bullet” to stop spread of HLB, the research investment is yielding tools that the grower can use right now to counter the disease. These include a combination of:

- Bactericides
- Nutritional Therapies
- Innovative Grove Design
- Thermal Therapy
- Tolerant Rootstocks

The future of the Florida, Texas and California citrus industries is in the hands of our research scientists. Early HLB detection, ACP management, conventional breeding, and engineered resistance will all be crucial elements in the long-term success of our national citrus production. These tools will be needed for Florida producers to continue providing the most nutrient-filled and great tasting juice to consumers.

What can Congress continue to do?

First, it is imperative that the next Farm Bill include an extension of the Emergency Citrus Disease Research and Extension Program which was created by the 2014 Farm Bill. The Trust Fund has enabled promising new research that offers long-term solutions to citrus greening, and hope for the future of our industry. But we’re only three years into the program, and more time is needed.

The farm bill also provides necessary funding to several other important specialty crop programs – such as the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), Specialty Crop Black Grants, the National Clean Plant Network. We urge Congress to continue to invest in these critical programs and seek to increase the allocation to these programs to the extent funds are available.

While a long-term solution is being developed through research, citrus producers are working hard to maintain as much production as possible to keep their businesses, critical infrastructure, and the domestic citrus industry intact. These efforts include various cultivation techniques – such as more intensive planting and

certain remedial measures that can have the effect of slowing the spread of the disease and maximizing short-term productivity. These techniques are costly but necessary.

For now, our goal is to get more trees in the ground to sustain the Florida citrus industry. Fruit is the lifeblood of the industry and we need to replant 30 million additional trees to restore our crops to the pre-HLB levels and support existing infrastructure.

The strategy is to create incentives for growers that will mitigate some risk and prompt them to invest.

Last September, the House overwhelmingly passed, under suspension, H.R. 3957 – the Emergency Citrus Disease Response Act, introduced by Rep. Vern Buchanan. The legislation would allow a producer the full deduction of the cost of replacing damaged or lost citrus trees, rather than capitalizing the trees then depreciating over a fourteen-year period. Unfortunately, the Senate took no action. Congress should take up and enact this legislation this year.

In addition, we urge members of this committee to weigh in with your colleagues on the Appropriations Committee to fully fund both the Citrus Health Response Program (CHRP) at $58 million and the USDA's Multi-Agency Coordination Group. These two programs provide important resources for short and medium-term solutions for the industry.

In closing I would just like to point out resilience is a hallmark of the Florida citrus grower. Growers are proud to produce products that support the economy, are nutritious, and taste good. Many families, including mine, have grown citrus for three, four and five generations while facing many crises including drought, freezes, hurricanes and disease. Our industry has a bright future ahead of it, but we need the federal government's continued investment and support during this crisis.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to testify on the industry's behalf.