

**Testimony of
Dale Murden
President
Texas Citrus Mutual**

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Small Business
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Energy and Trade
Washington, D.C.
June 11, 2015**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. On behalf of the over 400 commercial citrus growers in Texas, I want to express my deep appreciation for convening this hearing today to learn more about the challenges facing the U.S. citrus industry and all our many small, family-owned, growers.

My name is Dale Murden. My family and I currently grow citrus and raise cattle on 250 acres near my hometown of Harlingen, Texas. In addition to being President of Texas Citrus Mutual, I am also a current member of the Board of Directors of the Texas Farm Bureau, Texas Grain Sorghum Association and Delta Lake Irrigation District.

The Texas Citrus Industry is comprised of almost 27,000 acres across a three-county area in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Together, our growers produce more than 9 million cartons of fresh grapefruit and oranges each year and another 5 million cartons of juice fruit.

Texas is the third largest citrus producing state behind California and Florida. The Texas fresh commercial fruit market is valued at \$100 million and the juice market is valued at \$8 million. We also have close to 1,000 acres dedicated solely to organic production, which is valued at \$5 million. Texas A & M University economists estimate that the total business activity supporting Texas citrus production is almost \$200 million annually. I know this pales in comparison to my larger counterparts...but to my fellow growers, it's worth fighting for.

Currently, the industry employs up to 3,000 workers in a normal producing year, which culminates with a harvesting period from October to May.

In my own small operation, my family and I supply all the labor except in extreme cases when weather or pest and disease presence dictate otherwise.

My testimony today will focus on two critical and pressing issues facing growers in the Rio Grande Valley; I will discuss the potential economic devastation due to the invasion of the Mexican Fruit Fly from south of the border, as well as the rampant spread of Huanglongbing (also known as HLB or Citrus Greening), a disease that is capable of wiping out the entire US citrus production unless we can find a cure.

What sets Texas apart from my colleagues in California and Florida who are also facing many of the same issues is our proximity to Mexico and its porous border and the backyard citrus in our region. USDA has estimated that there are conservatively over 750,000 citrus trees in backyards and private homes Valley-wide. We all love our lemon and lime trees and are very proud we can grow them, but these trees pose a very significant threat to the commercial industry and, when left untreated, provide a safe harbor for fruit flies and the Asian Citrus Psyllid (ACP).

The Mexican fruit fly—or MexFly—is a fly originally found in parts of Mexico and Central America that has now spread beyond the border into the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The MexFly is especially problematic for oranges and grapefruit, which are extremely susceptible to infestation and economic losses resulting from direct damage caused by the larvae that feed on the fruit pulp. Since 1986, Texas has participated in a fruit fly control program headed by USDA-APHIS, culminating in a multi-pronged initiative in 2007 to eradicate the fruit fly from Texas and the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. In 2012 we thought we had successfully eradicated the MexFly but recently—due to continued violence along the Texas-Mexico border, aging USDA rearing facilities and the untreated backyard citrus trees, the MexFly has been found once again in our region.

The MexFly is not just an annoying pest - for hundreds of citrus growers in Texas, a discovery of a MexFly in your grove results in a full government quarantine of the immediate area, which means no fruit can be sold resulting in significant economic loss for the grower. For example, this year proved especially hard for one “pick-your-own” operation after a Mexican fruit fly was found in a neighboring back yard tree. The discovery triggered a quarantine and the growers was no longer able to harvest his crop for the year, leaving thousands of dollars of inventory on the trees with no hope for harvest. The problem is now reaching crisis levels, since January 2014, there have been fruit fly quarantine areas off and on in the entire citrus growing region of South Texas.

The best solution we have for combating MexFly is a stronger, more effective sterile fly program run by USDA-APHIS. The agency needs to devote significant resources to upgrading sterile fly production facilities and, perhaps more importantly, they need to provide better management of the existing resources.

While the Mexican fruit fly poses a real and immediate threat, the recent finds of HLB – or citrus greening – has growers of all sizes in south Texas extremely concerned. There is no known cure for this disease and we’ve learned from our friends in Florida that this disease is deadly serious...and means business.

Greening was first discovered in a Texas grove in January of 2012. Three short years later, we have confirmed that 417 residential trees and 846 commercial trees located in almost 100 groves valley wide show signs of the disease. And with the extremely long latency period of this disease, it is unclear how many more trees have already been infected.

What this has done to growers in terms of dollars is hard to quantify. When it was first discovered in Texas, we removed not only infected trees, but several of the surrounding trees as well. That translated to lost income, and with no replacement trees to plant, it also equated to a loss of future income as well.

Today, positive HLB finds have become so widespread, that most growers have discontinued tree removal. As such, it has quickly become a numbers game, and a point of diminishing returns that keeps spreading throughout the industry as fast as this disease can infect neighboring trees.

In a desperate attempt to mitigate the effects of HLB, most growers have initiated psyllid spray programs to try to slow the spread of infestation until a cure can be found. This strategy is in addition to our regular care programs and has increased our grove care expenses by almost \$400 per acre or 22%. I haven't had a 3% cost of living increase in years, much less 22%.

Even with all of these preventative strategies in place, Texas still has pockets of untreated groves, as well as the backyard trees, that continue to pose a significant threat to the industry. For these reasons, Texas recently created a special entity under the Department of Agriculture to specifically address HLB through a program that is being tailored after the boll weevil eradication program in the state. The industry plans to hold a referendum to assess where we stand on a valley-wide psyllid suppression program, which would impose additional costs on the many growers – large and small – throughout the Valley. Some estimates have projected program costs as high as an additional \$80-\$100 per acre.

Federal investments in HLB research and ACP eradication programs are critical to the survivability of the citrus industry in the U.S., as such, we have requested full funding under two high priority citrus programs: the Citrus Health Response Program (CHRP) and the Huanglongbing Multi-Agency Coordination (MAC).

The Citrus Health Response Program is a critical source of funding for the exclusion and eradication activities associated with the Asian Citrus Psyllid. The funds have been used in partnership with other state agriculture departments and citrus industry groups to research, survey and combat both the pest and disease.

The Huanglongbing Multi-Agency Coordination was started in 2014 when Congress authorized funding to develop solutions for the control and eradication of ACP and HLB. It is vital that this current funding be continued to ensure scarce federal, state and industry funds are allocated to those projects with the highest likelihood of developing a cure for this devastating disease without unnecessary setbacks or duplication of efforts.

I'd like to thank you for attention today on these dire issues. In short, the United States citrus industry as you know it, is in extreme trouble. We are fighting to preserve our very way of life and are doing everything in our power to prevent total eradication of an essential U.S. industry. With agency collaboration and much needed support, it is our hope that we will soon be able to eradicate ACP and HLB from our vocabulary entirely.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing and for all that you and the Committee are doing. We look forward to working with you in the future.