

# Citrus psyllid battle starts in backyard

By TED BATKIN  
and KERRY TUCKER

**L**ONG before the Asian citrus psyllid made its way to California, the citrus industry was moving to protect California citrus trees from this pest and the disease it can carry — Huanglongbing, or HLB, or citrus greening disease.

It ravaged Florida's citrus industry and continues to be a problem, averaging a 10% to 15% reduction in trees annually. We don't intend to let this happen in California.

## Homeowner help

Realizing the pivotal role of homeowners and their resistance to treating pests in the past, a public outreach plan was designed to create an environment of cooperation whereby homeowners would be willing to inspect their citrus trees and allow state and local agriculture officials to inspect and, if needed, treat their trees. You can't underestimate the importance of engaging consumers. If they're against you, the game changes dramatically.

The challenge is finding a positioning strategy and message platform that resonates and fuels consumer support.

Anecdotally, we found that Grandmother's lemon tree is not just a tree, but also a part of what makes California "California" — particularly in Southern California, with its citrus heritage.

To dig deeper, consumer qualitative research was conducted to identify emotional

## GUEST EDITORIAL



ASIAN CITRUS PSYLLID

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drivers likely to fuel supportive behavior. While we expected to find little or no awareness of the pest or disease at the time, consumers quickly grasped the danger to their own citrus trees and seemed willing (with guidance) to inspect their trees, or have them inspected by others. Prevention was also important to consumers.

After identifying the emotional drivers, a positioning-messaging strategy was developed, which centered on the notion that the psyllid and the disease is a potential "death sentence" for California citrus — one that could be stopped with help from homeowners. The positioning and messaging was rooted in research, and was the driver of all communication strategies and tactics.

## Third year

We are currently in our third year of public

outreach, with a focus on homeowners and public officials in infested areas, retail nurseries and big-box outlets, Master Gardeners and traditional and social media. Through a combination of broad-reaching tactics and hyper-local activities in the communities where the psyllid has been found, the message is making its way to homeowners.

On recent media tours, we sat down with journalists across the state and reached an audience of more than 1.3 million; a public service announcement reached another 31 million; and radio and traffic spots are being aired throughout Southern California, reaching another 8.4 million. All these efforts are also being supported via social media, including Facebook and Twitter.

Right now, the war against the Asian citrus psyllid is being fought in backyards — not commercial groves — and these homeowners are putting up a good fight. The public relations plan is creating a sense of urgency for homeowners to inspect citrus and ornamental trees.

The plan supports the Citrus Pest and Disease Prevention Program and California Department of Food and Agriculture programs in Southern California, mainly in the Los Angeles area. It also is designed to help prevent the movement of the psyllid into the San Joaquin Valley and points north.

The Asian citrus psyllid is not afraid to cross county, state or international bound-



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aries, and it can spread quickly. Florida learned that in order to stop HLB, we must control the pest.

## The lessons

Here's what's been learned:

- You shouldn't operate from personal assumptions about what motivates audiences.

- Consumer research can help you identify the emotional drivers for taking action.

- Keep messages simple and tied to driving specific behaviors (e.g.,

check your citrus trees).

- Design communication to drive people to a website to tell your story.

- Engage public officials early on for their support and extending your message.

- Identify forums for one-to-one discussion.

- Stay flexible to situational changes.

We are in for a very long battle; the more cooperation we can get from the public, the more successful the detection and treatment programs will be in urban areas.

*Batkin is president of the Citrus Research Board. Tucker is CEO of Nuffer, Smith, Tucker Inc., the public relations firm managing the Asian citrus psyllid campaign.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Change your name

*California Farmer* purports to speak on behalf of all California farmers. However, your recent editorial, "Delta vision needs some new insights," ignores the interests of farmers from Tracy to the Coachella Valley. These farmers rely on water provided by the Central Valley Project and State Water Project to farm more than 3 million acres of land, and these farmers will benefit from the relocation of the projects' export pumping plant intakes to the same extent as Metropolitan Water District. It is for this reason, that the agricultural water agencies that serve these farmers, along with Metropolitan, have committed to pay the costs to relocate these intakes and to construct the isolated conveyance facilities to further goals of water supply reliability. None of these agencies, contrary to your statements, are looking to the state water bond to pay these costs.

I understand that farmers in the Delta fear the construction and operation of isolated conveyance facilities. But these farmers have for too long enjoyed, without any compensation, the benefits of the CVP and SWP. Why should I, as a farmer concerned with the tons of salt being deposited on my ground annually, have to continue to take water conveyed through the Delta to enable farmers in the Delta to discharge their pollutants into the water that I am paying for? I am willing to pay costs associated with constructing, operating and maintaining isolated conveyance facilities because, in

part, diverting Sacramento River water from the Sacramento River instead of the south Delta, will reduce by ten-fold the concentrations of salt in the water delivered to my property. If farmers in the Delta are concerned with water quality, let them clean up their discharges before they start complaining about the effect an isolated facility will have on their water quality. Or better yet, let's sit down and develop a plan that will deliver good-quality water to those Delta farmers. Oh, I forgot, that would require they pay something for the benefits they receive.

Your commentary reflects the parochial interests of a small segment of California agriculture. I hope that in the future you will consider the interests of all California farmers before formulating a position on issues that are so critical to the state's agriculture industry. The alternative is that you change the name of your publication to "Delta Farmer."

*Daniel Errotabere  
General Partner  
Errotabere Ranches  
Riverdale*

*Editor's note: If farmers or large water districts in the central or southern state have an agreement to pay for costs associated with building an "isolated conveyance," it is a well-kept secret. That is not to say there is not such an agreement, but if so, it was made behind closed doors as has often been the case. It is the taxpayers who will pay, and that is what the bond issue is all about.*

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