

Mechanical harvesting revisited

By Nancy G. Hardy

In mid-March a group of concerned growers met at Ben Hill Griffin, Jr., Citrus Hall in Lake Alfred to discuss an old problem.

The subject, which kept the group talking for about three hours, was harvesting—the mechanical harvesting of citrus fruit.

Almost 20 years ago, the citrus industry became so concerned about labor shortages to harvest the crop that they devised a plan by which the industry would tax itself to fund research on mechanical harvesting. The tax generated about \$50 million, all of which was duly spent on trying to find a system or systems that would work with reasonable efficiency. It was an attempt to break the industry's dependence on an increasingly unreliable supply of labor.

In the final analysis, not much was accomplished. There are some picking aids and some partial

harvesting systems in use today, but by and large the industry is still with pickers, ladders and sacks, or in many cases, shaking the fruit loose and picking it up off the ground by various means—mostly strictly manual.

The obstacles to a harvesting system or systems seemed insurmountable, and the labor crunch eased when Florida's construction industry fell on hard times and many came back to the harvesting force.

But today, with crops up to 200 million boxes once again a foreseeable possibility, with labor costs very high, with regulations and record-keeping a crew manager's nightmare, the industry is thinking about what it can do.

One industry rep who attended the meeting—who asked not to be identified—pointed out that Florida growers and production men know

how to produce oranges at a very efficient rate; the ability to get them off the tree and to the packinghouse or processing plant in a cost-efficient manner, however, is another issue.

It's an essential, if Florida is to compete with other world producing areas—like Mexico—and especially if the current proposed U.S.-Mexican trade agreement becomes a reality without the sought-after exclusion for Florida citrus and other agricultural commodities.

No formal committee was formed, no chairman appointed, but the group agreed to get together some time in the future for more talks. There seemed to be a consensus that no full-blown program like the one of the '70s was being contemplated—no new box tax on growers—but that something needed to be done.

Dr. Walter Kender, director of the Citrus Research & Education Center at Lake Alfred, Dr. John Attaway, director of scientific research for the Florida Department of Citrus, and Mike Carlton, director of the grower division of Florida Citrus Mutual, all sat in on the session. Dr. Kender asked the group if there was anything the CREC needed to be doing to provide help in, perhaps, reviewing some of the new technology available or resurrecting some of the systems that were tested years ago—but, at the moment, no one seems to be exactly certain what should be done, or how—just that it is a potential problem area and should be brought to the industry's attention now, while there's time to deal with it. ■

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