

Fears that fewer hand harvesters would be available in the future prompted Florida's citrus industry to initiate a mechanical harvesting development program in the 1990s. Today, the motivation to get more growers to use mechanical harvesting has changed, Fritz Roka told growers Feb. 4 in Sebring. "It's not about the people; it's all about the cost," the University of Florida-IFAS agricultural economist said during a seminar aptly titled Shake, Rattle and Load.

UF agricultural economist Ron Muraro said Florida has a \$1.56 per box harvesting "cost disadvantage" compared to Brazil. Muraro said average orange harvesting costs in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2001-02 were less than 52 cents per box, compared to \$2.09 in Florida. Muraro said mechanical harvesting systems could cut Florida's costs by 50 cents per box, or up to nine cents per pound of solids.

Bill Barber, general manager of Lykes Citrus, said his company is saving from 10-15 percent by using mechanical harvesting systems. Lykes has used both the Oxbo and Korvan continuous canopy shake and catch systems. Last season, the large grower harvested half-a-million boxes mechanically. This season, Lykes hopes to mechanically harvest a million boxes from 4,000 acres.



BARBER

PROS AND CONS

Barber offered several other reasons to consider using mechanical harvesting:

- Fruit can be harvested and moved on a timely basis, even on rainy days.
- "You're actually in the grove for less time," so production activities can resume.
- In case of a labor shortage, mechanical systems will allow the crop to be harvested with fewer workers.

He also acknowledged several "cons" related to mechanical harvesting, including concern about its long-term effect on trees. "I'm becoming more and more convinced the damage is not a big problem to us," he said.

Picking fruit from multiple blooms, machine breakdowns, and harvesting non-uniform trees were additional



Mechanical harvesting: "It's all about the cost"

By Ernie Neff

concerns that Barber voiced. He added that the machines still need more refinement; more fruit escapes the catch system and

hits the ground than he likes to see. Despite his list of concerns, Barber seemed to come down squarely in support of mechanical harvesting. "It's where we have to be in the very near future, with the price of fruit these days," he said.

The day after the Sebring seminar, a bus partially full of growers and others visited groves near Immokalee to see an Oxbo canopy shaker and a Coe-Collier Citrus Harvesting trunk shaker in action.

Top of page: Spectators check out the Oxbo canopy shake system during the Feb. 5 demonstration near Immokalee.

Below: The Coe-Collier trunk shaker in action.



Harvesting costs for oranges in Sao Paulo (Brazil) and Florida

	2001-02 \$/Box
Sao Paulo	0.526
Florida	2.091
Florida cost disadvantage	(1.565)

Source: Ronald P. Muraro and Thomas H. Spreen (UF/IFAS)