

## THE STATE OF THE FLORIDA TROPICAL FRUIT INDUSTRY AND THE CHALLENGES GROWERS FACE

DEWEY STEELE<sup>1</sup> AND JONATHAN H. CRANE<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida, Inc.  
18710 SW 288<sup>th</sup> Street  
Homestead, FL 33031*

<sup>2</sup>*Tropical Research and Education Center  
18905 SW 280<sup>th</sup> Street  
Homestead, FL 33031*

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**Abstract.** The Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida is a group of commercial growers who organized nearly 20 years ago to represent our industry. Chris Rollins, who is the current director of Miami Dade's Fruit and Spice Park, spearheaded the idea to form this organization. Chris saw that there were many growers who could benefit from a coalition that would become unified to support the tropical fruit industry. This group's mission would evolve into teaching members' how to be better growers through education, promoting the tropical fruit industry and working with the University of Florida Extension Service, the faculty at the Tropical Research and Education Center, and other governmental and private organizations to help our industry. We would also receive grants through the help of Tropical Fruit Advisory Council and further promote the industry with marketing initiatives. Since then, we have accomplished much, but face many challenges. Our growers have suffered from offshore competition, hurricanes and loss of farmland due to increasing development pressure. We now are exploring options and looking for innovative ways to stay competitive and further enhance our ability to keep Florida tropical fruit farming viable.

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Florida has had a long and distinguished history of tropical fruit introduction, evaluation, and production. Commercial production of tropical fruit crops began well over 150 years ago. Some of these first commercial fruits were mango, avocado, lychee, pineapple and key lime. Early growers used teams of oxen and dynamite to clear land and blast holes in South Florida's oolitic limestone to plant their fruit crops. Plant explorers like David Fairchild brought thousands of tropical plants to Florida where they were studied, propagated and introduced. You can imagine the excitement of the first growers in Florida to be able to grow mangos, avocados and limes to be sold to the public.

South Florida has a marine subtropical climate and is surrounded on three sides by water. This results in generally less extreme and warmer temperatures than mid or north Florida. The closer to the coast we are, the warmer and less variation of temperatures throughout the year. These geographical and meteorological phenomenon allow for growing of many kinds of tropical and sub tropical fruits in Florida.

Temperature extremes in South Florida can range from 21 to 99°F. The coldest months are December, January and February. There is a 70% probability each year of reaching 32°F in the Redland-Homestead area. The wet season is late May to September. The dry season is October through April. Mean annual rainfall is 65 inches, but varies from year to year and has ranged from 38-95 inches. Hurricane season is June through mid-November.

Florida's commercial tropical fruit industry is made up of approximately 12,000 acres. The estimated gross sales value is approximately \$74 million with an economic impact of approximately \$137 million annually (Degner et al., 2002). There are over 800 commercial producers in Florida (Degner, 2002). About 90% of commercial production is located in Miami-Dade County. Other counties with commercial production are Lee, Palm Beach, Collier, Indian River, St. Lucie, Broward, Martin, Charlotte, Pasco and Sarasota.

Grower organizations in South Florida include the Avocado Administrative Committee, Agri Council, Tropical Fruit Advisory Council, Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida and Dade County Farm Bureau. Through member's dues and administrative action the Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida has been able to accomplish many good works over the years. However, changing market and political conditions are making tropical fruit growing much more challenging these days.

Due to trade agreements and increased production, foreign grown fruit has been steadily driving down prices. The U.S. seems anxious to allow foreign produce to flow into our country in an attempt to increase trade with other nations. This results in reduced prices for small farmers and increase pests and diseases arriving from abroad. It seems that a month doesn't go by without hearing about a new insect or disease that attacks our trees. These pests and diseases raise the costs of growing, further reducing profits to our farmers.

Rising land values and pressure to develop more housing puts great pressure on growers to sell the farm. With a thousand people a day moving to Florida our farmland is rapidly

\*Corresponding author; e-mail: jhcr@ufl.edu

Table 1. Estimated current acreages (2006).

Avocado	7,300
Longan	900
Mango	800
Lychee	800
Mamey sapote	550
Banana	500
Guava	400
Papaya	400
Carambola	180
Pitaya	50
Sapodilla	22
Annona	20
Jackfruit	17
Passion fruit	30

becoming an endangered commodity. The issue of farmland conservation needs to be addressed before there is no farmland left to save.

Hurricanes and flooding have become big issues to deal with. With 6 major hurricanes to hit land in the past 2 years, the tropical fruit industry has suffered great losses. Future growers will be required to keep trees properly pruned down to reduce losses. Hurricane recovery supplies will need to be kept to help set up downed trees and minimize damage. Freezes continue to be of concern to Florida growers even though we have not suffered a major freeze event since 1989. Proper irrigation techniques need to be practiced to alleviate damage from both freeze and drought. These practices are all costly for growers.

Shortages in workforce labor and strict government regulations will be increasingly important to growers. Everglades restoration and groundwater pollution will play an increasing part of decision making for growers to face. Best Management Practices will need to be implemented for all growers to better protect our environment. All this equals added costs, which make farming ever more difficult. The end question

might be, how much is the consumer willing to pay for fresh, locally grown, safe to eat tropical fruit?

These are changing times, so how do we adapt for the future? Can we still grow the same crops and make a profit? What are potential new crops for the future? There will definitely be a change from larger farms to smaller, estate type operations of 5 acres or less. Will those types of operations be viable? Will we continue to receive help from state universities and the federal government? Will Marketing and Promotion Boards and other cooperative schemes help the industry?

Without doubt, the industry is in rapid transition. There are numerous, significant challenges facing the industry. There is a need for developing sustainable production systems. There is a need for continued innovation and assistance from universities and institutions. There is a need for continued government programs that assist the industry adapt to changing technologies and assist during times of disaster. The food service industry could be an important outlet for high quality Florida tropical fruits. However, it will be necessary to develop the distribution network to serve this industry.

South Florida is the only place in the continental U.S. where a wide variety of tropical and subtropical fruits and vegetables can be grown. Every effort should be made to insure that this valuable resource remain for future generations. With education and awareness by the general public and help from the research community and government leaders, our new generation of tropical fruit growers will be able to continue to produce delicious tropical fruits usually only found in the far corners of the world. Our fruits will be fresher and of the best quality and should be the first choice of consumers searching for nutritious and exciting foods for their families.

#### Literature Cited

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