

Agriculture in Florida grows jobs: Front & Center

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For all the growth of tourism in Florida, and all the efforts by policy makers to expand higher-paying industries such as medical research and computer simulation, agriculture remains a large and vital part of the state's economy. The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, the industry's lead research agency, will be seeking more funding in the upcoming session of the Florida Legislature. In a recent email interview with the Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board, Jack Payne, the head of IFAS, discussed its activities and accomplishments, and addressed some of the biggest issues facing agriculture in Florida. Excerpts of that interview follow.

Q: What does agriculture mean to Florida's economy?

A: It's the second-largest source of Florida jobs after tourism, and it's arguably a more dependable employment base. Two million jobs can be traced to the state's agriculture, natural resources and related food industries — and not just on our 47,500 farms. Income from \$142 billion in annual sales gets spent around the state to create jobs in restaurants, department stores and car dealerships, too. Even some police officers and teachers owe their jobs to agriculture if you consider that in some counties, citrus groves alone account for more than a fifth of the local property-tax base.

Q: What role does IFAS play in Florida agriculture?

A: IFAS is the research and innovation arm of Florida agriculture. We do more than \$100 million in research annually on irrigation, plant breeding, disease prevention, and more. Our extension agents in all 67 counties bring the latest science to farmers. Our College of Agricultural and Life Sciences prepares the next generation to tackle the ever-increasing complexities of agriculture.

Q: How serious a threat is citrus greening in Florida, and what is IFAS doing to fight it?

A: Citrus greening could wipe out the industry. It won't if we continue the tremendous progress we've made in managing the disease. Greening used to be essentially a five-year death sentence. We've already devised ways to extend trees' productive lives. The stopgap solutions we've developed to keep trees alive are still too expensive for many growers to implement.

Q: How serious a threat is climate change to Florida agriculture?

A: It's potentially catastrophic. A temperature increase of 1 degree Celsius decreases yields by 6 percent, so projections even of a 2- to 4-degree Celsius rise are ominous. Higher temperatures bring with them more pests and diseases and increase demand for water. Sea-level rise brought on by climate change could increase salt-water intrusion into our freshwater supply and send coastal developers and homeowners scurrying inland to turn what is now agriculture into subdivisions.

Q: How important is comprehensive immigration reform to Florida agriculture?

A: More than 75 percent of farmworkers in Florida are immigrants; many of them undocumented. The current guest-worker program to legally bring agricultural workers doesn't provide enough legal labor. Reform that

includes an expanded guest-worker program and a path to legalization for undocumented workers won't take care of all of Florida agriculture's labor needs, but it would provide a more stable labor force than we have now, especially for seasonal work.

Q: Why should legislators approve the additional \$5.5 million you're seeking for IFAS?

A: Because of the tremendous return on publicly funded agricultural research. Some academics estimate a 20-to-1 payoff.

Last year we came up with a Web-based advisory system that saves a single average strawberry grower \$170,000 a year in fungicide spraying. Nearly all the acreage planted in blueberries in Florida is in IFAS-developed cultivars, creating a \$70 million-a-year industry.

We're developing ways to convert plant material into jet fuel and into life-saving nanotubes that attack cancer cells with medicine. Florida agriculture depends on IFAS know-how to use less water and spraying — a win for the economy and the environment. And it relies on IFAS research to produce better-quality fruits and vegetables than low-cost imports.

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