



By Carl Collen

Friday 9th February 2018, 22:40 GMT

Congress approves Florida citrus relief

Agriculture disaster package will "send billions" to growers hit by Hurricane Irma last year



Florida's citrus industry has thanked members of the US House and Senate for approving a Florida agriculture disaster package early Friday (9 February) that will send billions in relief to growers hit hard by Hurricane Irma.

The package – passed as part of the federal budget deal – provides a total of US\$3.6bn to the US Department of Agriculture, US\$2.36bn of which will be used to make direct payments to Florida producers who suffered hurricane-related crop losses last year.

Citrus' share is expected to be US\$760m, with the bill now moving on to President Donald Trump.

"We cannot thank the Florida delegation enough for their bi-partisan support of this measure to get citrus growers back on their feet after a catastrophic blow from Hurricane Irma," said Michael Sparks, executive vice-president and CEO of industry body Florida Citrus Mutual. "Growers and the communities and families that rely on citrus are

thankful to say the least. Livelihoods and a way of life are going to be saved because of this funding.

"Senators Nelson and Rubio were absolutely instrumental in the success of the relief package," Sparks continued. "On the House side Congressman Rooney, Ross and Diaz-Balart did yeoman's work for us in addition to almost the entire Florida delegation. Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam and Governor Rick Scott were with us every step of the way and we thank them as well."

On 10 September 2017 Hurricane Irma moved through the center of the state hitting Florida's major citrus producing regions with up to 120mph winds.

The hurricane blew fruit off the tree and caused widespread tree damage. An FCM survey of growers conducted post-Irma pegged total fruit loss at more than 65 per cent with some reports of 100 per cent fruit loss in the Southwest part of the state.

Shannon Shepp of the Florida Department of Citrus, an executive agency of Florida government charged with the marketing, research and regulation of the Florida citrus industry, said the move would bring relief for struggling growers who could now look ahead to a brighter future.

"Today's passage of disaster recovery funding immediately changes the outlook for so many," she said. "From growers who have been watching their bank accounts run into the red since September to the small-town communities reliant upon the citrus industry, a collective sigh of relief can be heard.

"None of this would be possible without the tireless efforts of Gov. Rick Scott, congressmen Tom Rooney and Dennis Ross, senators Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio," Shepp highlighted. "We thank these gentlemen for their unwavering support of Florida's signature industry and all they have done since the moment Hurricane Irma passed through our state.

<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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"Growers can now reinvest in their groves and look forward to new seasons ahead knowing that help is, indeed, on the way."

Prior to Hurricane Irma,

Florida was expected to produce about 75m boxes of oranges this season, according to private estimates.

This season, the United States Department of Agriculture

estimates Florida will produce 45m boxes of oranges, a 35 per cent decrease over last season, and 4.65m boxes of grapefruit, a 40 per cent decrease since last year.

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