

2007 FSHS PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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Peter McClure, FSHS President, 2007

Distinguished guests and fellow members, welcome to the One Hundred and Twentieth Annual Meeting of the Florida State Horticultural Society! It is quite a feat for any institution to last 120 years. Just for purposes of amusement, let us take a quick look at the other great events that happened in 1888 besides that first Florida State Horticultural Meeting in Ocala.

- The National Geographic Society was founded on January 27, 1888, in Washington, DC, which puts *them* in very fine company.
- Conveniently, in 1888 George Eastman registers the trademark Kodak and receives a patent for his camera that uses “roll film,” which when put together with the National Geographic Society, evolves over time, into that most visually stunning of scientific journals that is still so popular today.
- Thomas Edison meets with Edward Muybridge in 1888 to

discuss Muybridge’s idea of creating “sound film,” which evolves later into the motion picture industry.

- Ironically, Jack the Ripper is terrorizing London in 1888, which when put together with the motion picture industry, evolves into the countless horror films that invade our theaters every year.
- The Great Blizzard of ’88 swept across the eastern seaboard bringing 50 inches of snow and 50-mph winds that created 50-ft snowdrifts. Four hundred people die. The resulting gridlock in New York City sparked the political debate that evolves into the building of the New York City subway system.
- In Chicago in 1888, a stenographer named Frank McGurrian won a typing competition using the “touch typing” method, which is now the standard method of typing. This evolves, among other things, into the creation of a whole new language, a language that is totally unknown and indecipherable to adults everywhere, a language that is being created and re-created daily by millions and millions of our teenagers

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as they “touch type” instant messages to their friends.

- In 1888, Grover Cleveland wins the popular vote, but ... after many strange events and bizarre decisions, it is Benjamin Harrison, the spawn of a former President, who wins the Electoral College vote and thus becomes President. Oh boy, you can see it coming, can't you? Of course, as we all remember, this evolves into Palm Beach County, the number one agricultural county in Florida, becoming known as that infamous land of hanging and pregnant chads, which ultimately results in another spawn of a former President, after many strange events and bizarre decisions, being elected President by the Electoral College.
- And the last great event of 1888 happened when Vincent Van Gogh cut off part of his ear and gave it to a prostitute. I don't know what that evolved into, and I don't want to know, but I'm sure there has been a movie or two made about it.

Now, speaking of the horticultural industries in Florida, and thus of our Society, what are the great events that are happening in 2007? As it was back in 1888, and as it is every year, seemingly random and unrelated events are happening right now, all around us, that will mingle and mesh and fuse together to make the history of the future. What those events are, how they merge together, and the outcomes that derive from them are anybody's guess. But since I am the President, and since this is the Presidential address, I'll give it a shot. Over the past year (or so), the Great Events are:

- The Florida Gators win the NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship, then the NCAA Football National Championship, and then the Basketball National Championship again. It might not really be important, but it sure was fun!
- More people moved out of Florida than moved into Florida, maybe for the first time in 500 years.
- Sidebar note—Iowa has 24 million acres of harvested farmland with \$3.4 billion in net farm income.
- The market value of “nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod” overtakes “citrus” as the top commodity category in Florida, with \$1.8 billion in sales.
- The *Miami Herald* runs a series of articles bashing greenbelt laws.
- The citrus canker eradication program ends, a good idea that is defeated by a combination of urban outrage, judicial stupidity, grower apathy, research lethargy, governmental ineptitude, political cowardice, and hurricanes.
- Agricultural land currently receives about 10 cents in services from each dollar paid in property taxes.
- The Florida housing and real estate market set all-time highs for sales and prices.
- Homeowner's insurance policies in Florida increase by as much as 100%.
- Florida has 2.31 million acres of harvested farmland, \$3.2 billion in net farm income.
- The Florida Citrus Commission approves funding for the Executive Director of the Florida Citrus Industry Research Advisory Council.
- Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the state-run insurer of last resort, becomes the largest insurer of homes in Florida, as private insurance companies flee the state.
- Total citrus acreage in Florida falls to about 600,000 acres.

- The state legislature approves \$3.75 million, if matching funds are found, to the Florida Citrus Production Research Advisory Council for pest and disease research.
- The housing and real estate markets crash, causing a record number of foreclosures.
- Lake Okeechobee falls to its lowest recorded level ever, as Florida suffers an 18-month drought.
- New pests and diseases continue to arrive in Florida at a rate of one per month, and nobody is doing anything to stop it.
- The Governor signs the budget and approves \$50 million for ethanol research.
- More than 300 research proposals tallying up to over \$10 million, mostly on greening disease, are presented to the Florida Citrus Research Advisory Council to be funded.
- There is a special session of the state legislature trying to reduce exploding homeowner's property tax burdens.
- 90 million acres of corn is planted in the US, an area larger than Germany.
- Governments own approximately 40% of the land mass of Florida and are still buying, and they pay zero property taxes, and have to spend money caretaking that land.
- Governor Crist's original budget includes a \$75 million tax incentive for the motion picture industry
- And in a bizarre link to 1888, Al Gore, of all people, who lost the Presidential Electoral College Vote after winning the popular vote, on events that happened here in Palm Beach County, wins an Oscar at the Academy Awards for his documentary “An Inconvenient Truth”. An *Oscar* of all things!
- Jack Kevorkian is released from prison.
- Tropical storm Barry went by, just this weekend, and dropped 2.61 inches of rain on the Bluefield Division of Evans Properties, a blessed event.
- And the most important event over the last year is that we are all here at the 120th Annual Meeting of the Florida State Horticultural Society.

How will these events coalesce together and evolve over time to become our future history? Let us look into the crystal ball and see.

Greening disease, also known as the more lyrical sounding Huanglongbing, is in Florida now and was the driving force behind some of the aforementioned great events of the last year. After 12 years of clumsiness handling canker, there is neither the political will nor a grower consensus to take on a greening eradication program. So, the most important result of the failed canker eradication program has been the failure to launch a greening eradication program. What will result from that?

Our current future history is that, at best, an area of Florida the size of Lake Okeechobee, that currently is filled with citrus groves will not have citrus growing on it in 5 to 10 years. What will happen to that land? Some small percentage of it will go back into citrus. However, since most of this land is a patchwork quilt of small acreage groves in Polk, Highlands, Hardee, and Desoto counties, most of it will not. The current best management practices of managing greening disease preclude the success of small growers in dealing with greening effectively. If you don't believe that, just ask our Brazilian friends that are here with us. Today, the epidemiology of the disease is the ecology of its vector, the Asian Citrus Psyllid. The psyllid can't be controlled on small

acres unless your neighbors also control it. Because of the recalcitrant nature of farmers everywhere, it is not likely that a majority of small citrus growers will agree to control psyllids, or scout for and eradicate infected trees, in large enough groups of properties to be effective. They need to cooperate together, and agree to a management strategy that allows for psyllid control and greening eradication on large enough contiguous acres to have a chance to be effective. It ain't gonna happen. A Bubba ain't gonna change his spots just because some hippie researcher tells him he should. And the same can be said of many large growers. Many of them will not win the war against greening because of a failure to launch an effective effort in time.

So, what are you going to do with 500 plus square miles of land that used to have citrus on it? You've got to do something, because the tax man is itching to snatch away your greenbelt protection. Property taxes that are now about \$220 per acre for citrus could go up to \$2,200 per acre, or even \$22,000 per acre depending on location and classification. So you can't sit on it. The most lucrative crop in Florida has always been planting Yankees. But what do you think will happen to property values when that much land goes on the market that quickly? Are there going to be that many buyers? It already appears that the combination of insurance rates, property taxes, environmental concerns, water resource restrictions, traffic gridlock, housing prices, and a failing public school system may have stemmed the seemingly inexorable flood of people moving into Florida.

Let's grow alternative crops. OK, that's a great idea! The nursery industry is now the largest commodity group in Florida with \$1.8 billion in sales. Some citrus growers have already transitioned to this industry. It's a natural—citrus growers have the land, the water, and the people, with large markets close by. The problem is a matter of scale. We are talking about maybe 300,000 acres of current citrus land trying to transition to something else. Now in the entire United States, the greenhouse and nursery industry occupies a footprint of about 62,000 acres. All the nurseries and greenhouses in Florida, both under cover and outside, occupy a footprint that could fit inside of the footprint of the citrus company I work for, Evans Properties. Just one Florida citrus company could double the acreage of the entire nursery business in Florida today. Think about that.

OK, well, how about growing corn for ethanol. Great idea! So, let's compare Florida to a corn-growing state like Iowa. We have some similarities. Total land mass: Florida, 34.51 million acres; Iowa, 35.76 million acres. Total net farm receipts: Florida, \$3.2 billion; Iowa, \$3.4 billion. So far, so good. We match up well. Top crops: Florida, nursery crops and citrus; Iowa, corn and hogs (that eat the corn). Now—some telling differences. Total harvestable farmland acres: Florida, 2.31 million acres; Iowa, 24 million acres. Net farm receipts per harvestable acre: Florida, \$1,400 per acre; Iowa, \$140 per acre. Total government farm payments: Florida, \$258 million; Iowa, \$1.7 billion. That is an equivalent amount to the total sales of our entire nursery industry. So...if you subtract the mailbox income from the federal government, the net farm income per acre for these two states looks like this, Florida, still about \$1,400 per acre; Iowa, just \$70 per acre. The reality is it takes 20 times the number of acres to make a living

off of corn than it does off of citrus. That Florida citrus grower with 40, or 80, or even 500 acres, that is doing pretty well right now, is going to have a hard time making it on corn squeezin's for ethanol. And we haven't even mentioned the soil differences that make the comparison laughable. Yes, with improvements in cellulosic technology, improvements that should come from that \$50 million in research money, we could grow guinea grass or sweet sorghum or eucalyptus trees, or some other crop in Florida for ethanol. I'd love that; I am the king of growing guinea grass—I do that real well! But you still have to compete with a \$70 per acre crop in the market place that provides a ceiling to your income. Even as oil prices rise, you will still have to compete with Iowa corn or Brazilian sugar cane, as well as coal, solar, nuclear, and other energy sources.

How about cattle? When you run the numbers, the fencing costs more than the income for the first 6 years. Pine trees? That's good if you don't need any income for the next 30 years or so. Remember, we are talking about sand hills in Florida. Aquaculture? Please, spare me. The fact is, in the near future, there are not any alternative crops that work on so massive a scale as citrus. It behooves us all to keep a viable citrus industry in Florida. It is better for all the other horticultural groups not to have citrus growers enter their markets. It is better for the housing and building industries not to have that surplus land on the market. It is better for counties to charge citrus \$200 per acre in taxes, than for them to charge \$20 per acre for cattle, or \$40 per acre for corn, or zero if the groves are bought by a governmental entity. If these acres are urbanized, where the services delivered cost more than the taxes derived, it will be an economic nightmare.

The good news is that we have that \$3.75 million, which should turn into \$7.5 million if we find the money to match it, to spend on research that could save citrus from the onslaught of illegally introduced exotic pests and diseases. We have brilliant researchers waiting to get the funds and go. We have industry support. We need to battle for the continuation of these funds for the next 3 to 5 years to give us a shot. We have the opportunity to change the current future history with the research that will be done over the next 3 years on greening. It is of the utmost importance not only to citrus, but to all the other horticultural crops as well as many other industries within this state. Think about it—if a theoretical industry that doesn't even exist, such as ethanol production, is worth \$50 million a year for research, and a blatantly salacious industry, such as motion pictures, is worth \$75 million a year, shouldn't a real and existing \$1.6 billion dollar cash crop that creates a \$9 billion impact on Florida's economy and pays \$1 billion in taxes each year be worth some extra research funding dollars to protect? The answer is a resounding yes! Wake up and smell the orange blossoms, people!

Have we got the time? Do we have the moxie? Our future history will provide the answers. I hope and pray that future history isn't delivered via an Al Gore documentary showing Jack Kevorkian "assisting" the last citrus grower left on his way to that great Valencia grove in the sky.

It would be far better indeed, to have that future history written instead on the pages of the Proceedings of the Florida State Horticultural Society! That way I'll get to read it.