Listening Sessions on Eastern Tree Fruit Farms: Georgia

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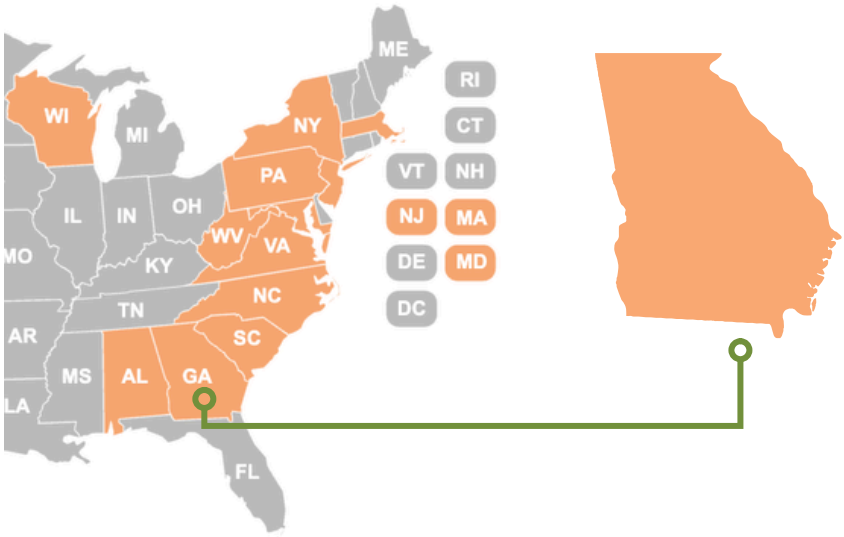
Seven listening sessions were held across various U.S. regions in early 2025 as part of a four-year USDA-funded project called, ***Cultivating Tomorrow's Orchard: Evolving and Enhancing IPM in Eastern Tree Fruit Systems.*** Each session focused on gathering the experiences, challenges, and needs of orchard owners and managers regarding pest management, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) adoption, regulatory constraints, economic pressures, and weather pattern impacts. This fact sheet summarizes results from the listening session that took place on February 4, 2025, with orchard owners and managers in Georgia, primarily growing peaches and pecans, representing large-scale, commercial farming operations. Many of these growers operate thousands of acres across multiple counties and sell through a variety of channels, including wholesale, retail, and direct-to-consumer markets.



Key Pest Challenges

- **San Jose Scale -** most expensive to control accounting for more costs than all other pests combined, difficult to manage despite current control efforts
- **Plum Curculio -** dominates spray programs, forcing frequent pesticide applications; egg-laying behavior of the weevil makes fruit unsellable if not properly managed
- **Stink Bugs -** contribute to fruit damage
- **Borers -** Peach Tree Borer once seasonal but now year-round concern
- **Mites and Thrips -** affect both peaches and strawberries

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Pest Management Practices

- **Chemical Sprays:**
  - The primary control method, with frequent applications.
- **Integrated Pest Management:**
  - Growers attempt targeted applications instead of blanket spraying, but pest unpredictability makes it difficult.
- **Biological & Cultural Controls:**
  - Some interest in alternative methods, but their effectiveness and cost remain a concern.
- **Monitoring & Research Collaboration:**
  - Farmers follow recommendations from university researchers and agricultural advisors.
- **Key Challenges:**
  - Erratic emergence patterns make precise targeting difficult.
  - Insecticide resistance forces increased spray frequency.
  - Regulatory bans on effective pesticides have made some pests worse (e.g., San Jose Scale worsened after the ban of Methyl Parathion).

Social Challenges & Economic Challenges

- **Growers noted increased public scrutiny over pesticide use:**
  - Consumer expectations are contradictory – People want perfect fruit but oppose pesticideuse.
  - Neighbors and community members frequently ask about spraying practices.
  - Some growers receive legal threats from residents concerned about chemicals.
  - Regulations are stricter on specialty crop growers (e.g., peaches, pecans) than large-scale row crops.
- **Pest Control is one of the highest costs in production, second only to labor**
  - Pesticide costs represent 15-20% of total production costs.
  - Economic sustainability is the top priority – Growers will not adopt new methods unless they are both effective and affordable.
  - Growers rely on proven methods – Experimental techniques must demonstrate clear cost benefit advantages before adoption.

Regulatory Concerns

- **Frequent audits and strict pesticide regulations affect specialty crop growers more than other sectors:**
  - Specialty crop growers undergo 7+ audits per year, including:
    - Department of Labor audits
    - Georgia Department of Agriculture audits
    - Primus audits
  - Row crop growers face fewer audits.
  - Regulations are stricter for fresh-market produce (e.g., peaches) compared to processed crops (e.g., peanuts).
  - Some growers feel regulators unfairly target specialty crop farms while ignoring larger scale row crop operations.

Weather Pattern Impact on Pest Management

- **Growers reported increasingly erratic weather patterns, affecting pest behavior:**
  - Warmer winters lead to unpredictable pest emergence.
  - Dramatic temperature swings impact crop health and pest populations.
  - Late frosts or extreme heat waves force adjustments in spray schedules.
  - Some pests, like San Jose Scale and Plum Curculio, have become harder to predict.

Research Needs & Opportunities

- **San Jose Scale Management:**
  - Interest in alternative control methods, such as mating disruption and entomopathogenic fungi (EPF).
  - Growers want a “silver bullet” that would eliminate or drastically reduce the problem.
- **Plum Curculio Control:**
  - Interest in border sprays and behavioral deterrents.
  - However, skepticism exists about the effectiveness of border sprays.

Communication Preferences

- **Growers rely on multiple sources for pest management updates:**
  - Emails and blogs from university researchers.
  - Spray guides (“The Bible” for pest management).
  - Apps like MyIPM for quick reference.
  - Word-of-mouth among growers and suppliers.
  - Some suggested audio updates or podcasts to listen to while working.

Final Takeaways

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- San Jose Scale and Plum Curculio are the top concerns for Georgia growers.
- Economics drive pest management decisions. Farmers will only adopt new methods if they are effective, practical, and affordable.
- Extreme and erratic weather patterns are making pest management more difficult, requiring new approaches and better predictive models.
- Public perception is increasingly challenging, with neighbors and consumers questioning pesticide use despite demanding perfect fruit.
- Regulatory compliance is a constant burden, with audits affecting specialty crop growers disproportionately.
- Research must focus on real-world solutions, not just theoretical approaches that are too expensive or impractical at scale.