

Citrus growing area in Brazil's São Paulo dropping

A new analysis of satellite imagery maps from the past 26 years has revealed that citrus cultivation in the state of São Paulo has witnessed a dramatic fall with orange cultivation ceding ground to sugarcane, according to a new soon-to-be-published study by Embrapa Monitoramento por Satélite (EMS), a division of Brazil's state-run agricultural research company Embrapa.

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“This perception [of loss] already existed, but with the mapping we are now able to know with great clarity exactly where is this phenomenon taking place,” EMS researcher Carlos Cesar Ronquim told FOODNEWS

The focus of the study was a 52,000 sq. km region in north and northeast São Paulo, known as the basin of the Mogi-Guaçu and Pardo rivers (Bacia Mogi-Pardo), which encompasses 125 municipalities. This region under study concentrates the largest citrus producing area in the state of São Paulo.

“Between 1988 and 2014, the acreage devoted to citrus cultivation in Bacia Mogi-Pardo fell from 488,686 hectares to just 281,223 ha. The number of farms active in citrus production in the region fell from 15,392 to 11,638. In the same period, sugarcane cultivation expanded from around 1.0 million ha to around 2.2 mln ha,” said Ronquim.

The study divided Bacia Mogi-Pardo into two micro-regions and the first micro-region (including the municipalities of Bebedouro, Colina, Itápolis and Olímpia) has seen its enormous areas with citrus groves transformed into sugarcane plantations that now dominate the micro-region as they occupy more than half of the acreage in these municipalities.

Conversely, in micro-region number two, the acreage under citrus cultivation expanded in four key municipalities that were studied (Casa Branca, Conchal, Mogi Guaçu and Mogi Mirim). These citrus producing zones are closer to the metropolitan zones of Campinas and São Paulo, which enables growers to diversify by switching from orange supplies to the juice industry to sales of fresh orange fruit to the metropolitan regions.

“These results are worrying. The study reveals that the crisis in the citrus production sector is motivating many growers to abandon the crop. Had the sugarcane industry not gone through a severe financial crisis in the past five years, the rate of uprooting citrus groves would have been much higher,” he explained.

Cesar Ronquim said the results of the new study show Brazil’s OJ industry that juice manufacturers are effectively losing their raw material. “Juice processing industries have already closed in the municipalities of Matão, Bebedouro, Itápolis and Taquaritinga (microregion 1),” he declared.

“Brazil’s OJ industry is now under threat, yet the trend could still be reversed,” said Cesar Ronquim. He explained that certain actions could improve the situation, such as: (i) actions designed to increase global demand for OJ, (ii) development of citrus varieties resistant to HLB and citrus canker, (iii) modernising labour laws for contracting workers during harvesting and (iv) development of policies that would enable industries to offer better prices to citrus growers.