Incidence of walnut blackline disease in California’s commercial orchards

Wilbur O. Reil □ Gordon A. Rowe □ David E. Ramos □ Sreko M. Mircetich

Early detection is vital but difficult

Walnut blackline disease was first seen in Contra Costa County in 1929 and probably was present earlier. A few years ago, S. M. Mircetich and co-workers determined that the disease is caused by a graft-, seed-, and pollen-transmissible virus identified as a strain of cherry leaf-roll virus. Inoculation experiments have also shown that the virus moves slowly within the tree — 5 to 30 inches vertically and 2 to 3 inches horizontally per year. This slow movement means that the tree may be infected with the virus for several years before blackline shows at the graft union.

The typical symptom, from which the disease received its name, occurs at the graft union of English walnut scion on either black or Paradox (black-English hybrid) rootstock. Black walnut and Paradox are hypersensitive to the virus, which causes the death of cambial cells at the graft union. The dead tissue turns black and forms a narrow line on black walnut. On Paradox rootstock, a canker usually forms, starting at the graft union and extending downward.

Until the virus kills a relatively large portion of tissue around the graft union circumference, few or no symptoms are visible. The decline of the tree occurs because of girdling that eventually starves the tree.

Before the 1950s, the disease was observed only in the California counties surrounding San Francisco Bay; it was assumed to be limited to coastal areas and to be incapable of affecting walnut trees in the hot interior valley. In the 1950s and 1960s, blackline began to appear in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Yolo counties, indicating possible spread into the valley. Now, blackline-affected trees can occasionally be found in many counties of the Central Valley, and considerable numbers are showing symptoms in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, and Yolo counties, in addition to the coastal counties of Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara, and San Benito. The walnut industry now considers blackline a serious threat in the entire state.

Identification of the virus that causes walnut blackline and more recent work on the methods of transmission and movement within the tree by Dr. Mircetich helped explain some of the field observations. At the same time, an ELISA test (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) was developed and shows promise as a diagnostic tool for early detection of the virus.

In 1982, at the request of the Walnut Marketing Board, we conducted a blackline survey to: (1) estimate the incidence and distribution of blackline-affected
these counties accounted for (USDA) Statistical Reporting Service. Symptoms and should not be considered in charts younger than eight years old. Prob¬
ed the sample to orchard blocks of of the walnut-bearing acreage in California; (3) identify areas with very low disease incidence where a blackline eradication program might be considered; and (3) determine the feasibility of serolog¬
al testing (ELISA) of pollen in estimating the extent of symptomless trees that may be infected with blackline virus in diseased orchards. **Survey**

We obtained a list of walnut orchard blocks in the major producing counties from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Statistical Reporting Service. These counties accounted for 90 percent of the walnut-bearing acreage in 1981. To facilitate the survey, we further restrict¬ed the sample to orchard blocks of 10 acres or larger planted in 1974 or earlier. Although younger trees have been seen with the disease, we assumed that orchards younger than eight years old probably would not have trees expressing symptoms and should not be considered in the survey.

For greater standardization, the sur¬vey included only the following varieties: Ashley, Eureka, Franquette, Hartley, Payne, Serr, Tehama, and Vina. These varieties represented 89 percent of the bearing acreage for 1981; all others were considered either regional in distribution or too low in numbers to provide useful data. For the survey, we selected 3 to 5 percent of these blocks in each county, using a random sequential sampling method.

Property owners of the selected or¬chards were contacted for permission to inspect a 20 percent subsample in each orchard. Every effort was taken to standardize techniques used in the field. Four inspectors were trained in the examina¬tion procedures and worked as a team; each inspector surveyed approximately one-fourth of the trees in each orchard. The supervisor spent considerable time each week with each inspector to ensure uniformity.

Each subsample tree was visually ex¬amined for blackline symptoms during the late spring and summer of 1982. Crite¬ria used to determine a blackline-suspect tree were: (1) general tree appearance, including yellowing, sparse foliage, lack of vigor, and dieback; (2) suckers occurring from the rootstock; (3) budunion pinholes, cracking, or bleeding; (4) bleeding and cankers from the rootstock; and (5) depres¬sion or flattening of the scion or slight bulging of the rootstock immediately below the graft union.

The inspector cut a small observation window across the graft union through the bark to the wood of each suspect tree and removed the patch to examine the cambial area. Blackline was positively diag¬nosed when a definite black line or, with Paradox rootstock, a canker showed at the graft union.

After the examination, the orchard was mapped to show all blackline-affect¬ed trees as well as missing and replanted trees. The information was then com¬puterized and analyzed. A total of 58,209 trees in 266 blocks were examined in 16 major producing counties.

**Survey results**

The survey showed that 3,873 trees or about 6.7 percent of the 58,209 trees sam¬pled had blackline at the graft union. Re¬plants totaled 2,276 or 3.9 percent of the trees sampled, of which 1,451 or 2.5 per¬cent were in the six counties of highest blackline incidence. If one assumes the re¬planted trees in those six counties had re¬placed blackline-killed trees previously in those positions, the blackline-affect¬ed trees and replants would add up to an observed incidence of 9.1 percent. The addi¬tion of another 748 or 1.3 percent for missing, probably blackline-killed, trees in those six counties means the total inci¬dence of blackline in surveyed orchards is more likely closer to 10.4 percent than 6.7 percent. In counties with low blackline in¬cidence, a few of the spaces where trees were missing or replanted were possibly losses to blackline. This estimate is prob¬ably conservative, since tests of pollen by ELISA have shown that the number of trees actually infected with the blackline virus may be much higher than the num¬ber showing blackline at the graft union.

Incidence of trees with blackline at the graft union ranged from a low of 0.04 and 0.06 percent in Glenn and Tehama coun¬ties, respectively, to a high of 53.9 percent in Contra Costa County (table 1). The numbers of missing and replant trees were generally high in the counties with a high incidence of blackline, and most of these losses were probably due to black¬line. The high numbers of replant and missing trees in Sutter County, however, could have resulted from causes other than blackline.

There were significant differences among varieties, with Eureka and Payne showing the highest incidence of blackline (table 2). One must take into consider¬ation, however, the prevalence of those varieties in certain counties. Although 28 percent of the sampled trees were Eureka and Payne, 82 percent of the sampled Eu¬reka and Payne trees were in Contra

### TABLE 1. Blackline survey report by county

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Acres surveyed</th>
<th>Trees checked</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Blackline</th>
<th>Replants</th>
<th>Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butte</td>
<td>581.0</td>
<td>4,782</td>
<td>97.40</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.89</td>
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<td>Colusa</td>
<td>177.3</td>
<td>1,167</td>
<td>97.85</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contra Costa</td>
<td>190.2</td>
<td>1,786</td>
<td>91.63</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>8.99</td>
<td>15.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresno</td>
<td>182.2</td>
<td>1,206</td>
<td>99.56</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenn</td>
<td>245.4</td>
<td>2,076</td>
<td>93.40</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings</td>
<td>103.9</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>95.92</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake</td>
<td>359.2</td>
<td>1,998</td>
<td>99.34</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Merced</td>
<td>373.4</td>
<td>3,347</td>
<td>90.08</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
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<td>San Benito</td>
<td>188.8</td>
<td>1,914</td>
<td>76.12</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Joaquin</td>
<td>996.8</td>
<td>6,815</td>
<td>68.20</td>
<td>18.79</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanislaus</td>
<td>595.8</td>
<td>8,740</td>
<td>85.68</td>
<td>9.48</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutter</td>
<td>556.6</td>
<td>3,555</td>
<td>88.16</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehama</td>
<td>462.2</td>
<td>4,405</td>
<td>96.57</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tulare</td>
<td>1,011.2</td>
<td>9,923</td>
<td>95.97</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yolo</td>
<td>324.3</td>
<td>3,082</td>
<td>92.45</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yuba</td>
<td>286.5</td>
<td>2,406</td>
<td>96.71</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>6,998.8</td>
<td>58,209</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2. Blackline survey report by variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Acres surveyed</th>
<th>Trees checked</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Blackline</th>
<th>Replants</th>
<th>Missing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>673.2</td>
<td>7,317</td>
<td>93.98</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eureka</td>
<td>624.9</td>
<td>3,916</td>
<td>65.83</td>
<td>21.73</td>
<td>8.04</td>
<td>4.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franquette</td>
<td>814.0</td>
<td>3,423</td>
<td>95.76</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hartley</td>
<td>1,825.4</td>
<td>13,074</td>
<td>88.06</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payne</td>
<td>1,338.6</td>
<td>12,725</td>
<td>74.42</td>
<td>17.49</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serr</td>
<td>1,198.4</td>
<td>11,721</td>
<td>96.33</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehama</td>
<td>356.1</td>
<td>4,411</td>
<td>95.94</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vina</td>
<td>168.2</td>
<td>1,622</td>
<td>98.52</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>6,998.8</td>
<td>58,209</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of trees was over. The amount of pollen

til after the prime pollen-shedding period

collected from most of the trees was therefore insufficient to provide a reliable sample for detection of blackline virus by ELISA, even though the tests showed that some of the symptomless trees were already infected with blackline virus.

Discussion and conclusions

Because walnut pollen is wind-borne, long-distance spread from diseased to healthy orchards may follow the prevailing wind pattern. How far viable pollen will travel and infect healthy trees is not known, but wind-blown diseased pollen may have been responsible for the introduction of blackline into the interior valleys from the San Francisco Bay area, where it first appeared. Considering the slow movement within trees before visible symptoms occur and the number of cases reported in the early 1930s, it is quite possible that the blackline virus was introduced into California a long time before blackline-affected trees were discovered in 1929.

Blackline has now been identified throughout the Central Valley, although incidence decreases with distance from San Francisco Bay. The disease progression suggests that the virus has gradually moved during the last 60 or 70 years from the original source of infection to a distance of approximately 200 miles from San Francisco Bay.

Statistical estimates of incidence of blackline and replants in relation to county, variety, and age showed significant differences between counties. Contra Costa (53.9 percent), San Benito (18.3 percent), San Joaquin (18.8 percent), and Stanislaus (9.5 percent) were all above average in incidence; statistical estimates show that generally they were significantly higher (with a probability of 0.99) than all other counties.

A further breakdown within counties showed that western San Joaquin County orchards had a much higher incidence of blackline (36.2 percent) than did the eastern area of the county (13.3 percent). Likewise, the western area of Stanislaus County was higher in blackline than the rest of the country (14.2 vs. 11.2 percent). Merced County also had more disease in its western than in its eastern region (7.3 vs. 2.3 percent). While orchards were se-

### TABLE 3. Percent blackline found in orchards planted in different years in Contra Costa, San Benito, San Joaquin, and Stanislaus counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year planted</th>
<th>Blackline</th>
<th>Orchards surveyed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974-70</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969-65</td>
<td>20.01</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-60</td>
<td>19.62</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959-55</td>
<td>25.46</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1955</td>
<td>32.52</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lected randomly throughout the county and not selected as to location, the arbitrary separation of eastern and western sections of a county also suggests a progression of disease from the west near San Francisco Bay.

A high incidence of blackline was observed in Eureka and Payne varieties. However, these two varieties are mainly grown in Contra Costa, San Benito, San Joaquin, and Stanislaus, the same counties with the highest blackline incidence.

If tree age is considered in the four counties with the highest blackline incidence, a trend is observable. Orchards with trees 8 to 12 years old showed a low incidence of blackline (4.2 percent) in these four counties as compared with those that were 13 to 17 years old (20 percent) or 18 to 22 years old (19.6 percent) (table 3). Orchards with trees 23 to 28 years old in these four counties averaged 25.7 percent blackline and those older than 28 years showed 32.5 percent. Although the variation between blocks was too great for statistical validity, the low incidence found in the 8- to 12-year-old orchards supports the contention that blackline occurs in bearing orchards, with disease increasing over time.

The blackline virus is not uniformly distributed within infected trees, and individual catkins may only be partially infected with the virus. Thus, catkins yielding at least 50 grams of pollen are required from each tree to give a reliable ELISA test for an early virus infection. Collection and processing of samples this large would be difficult and extremely time-consuming on a commercial scale. Spring weather conditions can also hinder pollen collection. Serological testing (ELISA) of pollen to determine the extent of symptomless trees infected with blackline virus in commercial orchards thus does not appear to be practical at this time.

Current technology also appears to be too costly and tedious for successful eradication of blackline from areas of low incidence. Such eradication would require ELISA testing of each tree within the targeted area and removal of all infected trees. The potential for reintroduction of diseased pollen from sources outside the area would make it necessary to monitor orchards regularly and would severely limit any chance of success.

The ELISA, however, is an efficient, reliable, and rapid procedure for detection of the blackline virus in nursery trees, English walnut seedlings and seed, and graftwood and budwood. The ELISA may be effectively used for indexing propagation material for the presence of the blackline virus when and if needs arise for these control measures.

Wilber O. Reil is Farm Advisor, Yolo and Solano County; Gordon A. Rowe is Economist, Cooperative Extension, University of California, Berkeley; David E. Ramos is Pomologist and Program Director (Horticulture), Cooperative Extension, UC Davis, and Sreko M. Mircetich is Plant Pathologist, USDA Plant Pathology, stationed at UC Davis. This study was a cooperative effort involving Alex French, California Department of Food and Agriculture, USDA, and UC Cooperative Extension, including the following farm advisors: Thomas M. Aldrich, Robert H. Beede, David H. Chasey, William W. Coates, Mark W. Freeman, Janine K. Hasey, Chester L. Hemstreet, Lonnie C. Hendricks, David M. Holmberg, Kathleen M. Kelley, William H. Krueger, Paul D. LaVine, William H. Olson, Joseph W. Osgood, Ross R. Sanborn, Wallace R. Schrader, and G. Steven Sibbett. Financial assistance for the project was provided by the Walnut Marketing Board.