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AGRICULTURE

Canker ban puts squeeze on Florida tangerine growers

The effects of citrus canker can menace tangerine growers, even when the disease is far from their trees, growers in this small segment of the citrus industry are learning.

BY PHIL LONG

plong@MiamiHerald.com

SEBRING - Canker ban saps sales of tangerines

Marvin Kahn stopped his SUV near the top of a sandy hill to admire a 20-acre stand of tangerine trees southeast of this small city, where his family has grown citrus for more than 80 years.

Row after row, thousands of green, golf-ball sized, immature tangerines dangle amid the sun-drenched leaves, giving Kahn a glimpse of next winter's crop of Honey-T's.

But who will eat Kahn's tangerines is a big mystery.

Normally, most of those tangerines would go to California, said Kahn, 73, whose father began growing fruit here in 1933.

But not this season.

California, Arizona, Texas and three other citrus-producing states are out of his reach this year.

The reason: Florida's problems with citrus canker, a disease that is nowhere near Kahn.

In January, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the state of Florida gave up the 10-year fight to eradicate citrus canker, a disease that experts say blemishes fruit but is harmless to humans.

The canker eradication program led to the bulldozing and burning of more than 10 million commercial citrus trees and nearly five million nursery citrus trees, most of them because they were within 1,900 feet of a canker-infected tree.

BANNED SHIPMENTS

As a result of killing the eradication program, the USDA banned shipments of fresh fruit from Florida to the other citrus-growing states in an effort to make sure any infected fruit didn't affect trees in those states.

It's a decision that Kahn and others, including the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, disagree with, but it's the law.

There is no canker within miles of his grove, Kahn argues, and no evidence that canker has been transmitted on tangerines that are picked from canker-free groves and sent through packing houses, where they are thoroughly washed and disinfected before they are boxed.

"Last year we made a \$70,000 net profit," Kahn said of the 20-acre grove he was visiting. This year, at best, he will recover the cost of growing the fruit.

It is too early to tell what prices Kahn and others will get this season. Last year a 95-pound box of tangerines averaged about \$14 for Kahn. This year, "less than \$10," Kahn estimated.

Kahn usually ships as many as 60,000 boxes of tangerines each year from his own groves and those he manages for others, nearly all to California.

The overall effect of the ban, Kahn said, is that "we're having our primary market taken away from us. We will not be able to sell our fruit for what it is really worth."

Like most growers, Kahn, whose firm employs 30 people, doesn't have all his eggs in one basket. He also grows oranges and grapefruit that are both shipped fresh domestically and overseas or sent to the juice plant.

Nevertheless, he will have to compete in an already saturated tangerine market in the United States.

The industry is scrambling to find new tangerine markets outside the citrus-producing states.

"The shippers and sales agency marketers are going to make every effort to do that, no question about it," said Richard Kinney, executive director of the Florida Citrus Packers Association.

Tangerines are a small but important part of the Florida citrus crop, which produces about 170 million boxes of all types of citrus each year. Depending on the year, as many as 1.5 million 45-pound cartons of tangerines go to the citrus-producing states, Kinney said.

California growers are sympathetic to Florida's plight but not to the extent that they will risk their industry to being exposed to canker, said Citrus Mutual President Joel Nelsen.

FEAR OF CANKER

"But the fact of the matter is Florida has canker and we don't want it," Nelsen said. USDA rules are clear on the blocking of fruit from states where there is a disease or pest problem that can be spread from one state to another, he said.

There is a USDA study under way to determine the conditions under which fresh Florida citrus can be shipped to citrus-producing states.

Florida citrus officials say the industry will weather the current storm.

"We may not get the pricing as high as we have had it in previous years, but I still think the industry can step up and meet the challenge," said Duke Chadwell, manager of the Citrus Administrative Committee, the agency that sets minimum standards for fresh citrus shipments.