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AGRICULTURE

Experts predict smaller orange crop

Agriculture officials say the 2005-2006 citrus crop will be one of the worst crops because of last year's hurricanes.

By Susan Salisbury

The Palm Beach Post

For the second straight season, late-maturing oranges in hurricane-hit areas will leave Florida with one of its worst citrus crops in more than a decade, federal agriculture officials said Wednesday.

However, although far from robust, the 2005-2006 crop is at least slightly better than last year's.

In its final forecast for the season, the National Agricultural Statistics Services placed the orange crop at 151 million 90-pound boxes, up from 149.8 million a year ago. The count was lowered by 2 million boxes from June's forecast because labor shortages are making it difficult to get late-season Valencia oranges picked.

Alaron Trading analyst Boyd Cruel said the updated forecast wouldn't likely change orange juice prices for the next few months because investors were already expecting a smaller crop. An estimated 90 percent of Florida's oranges are squeezed into juice, and the state produces 75 percent of all oranges in the United States.

Hurricanes over the past two seasons have greatly reduced crops and hurt Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry, in stark contrast to a decade of bumper years.

GRAPEFRUIT HARVEST

The grapefruit harvest also has suffered. Last season, there were just 12.8 million 85-pound boxes. This year, predictions are for 19.3 million boxes.

"We had increased grapefruit production even with Wilma," said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League in Vero Beach.

Early predictions are for 25 million to 27 million boxes of grapefruit in the 2006-07 season, Bournique said. In 2003-04, Florida produced 40.9 million boxes of grapefruit.

Growers are hoping hurricanes don't hit the groves again this year.

"The trees need a break. They have had three hits from hurricanes in the last 18 months," said Nat Roberts, general manager of Callery-Judge grove near Loxahatchee. "The hurricanes threw most of the fruit on the ground for us."

CANKER BACTERIUM

Stan Carter, citrus division manager at McArthur Farms in Port St. Lucie, said production was higher than last season, but that citrus canker bacterium increases uncertainty about the upcoming crop.

"I'm taking it one day at a time. I have no clue about how this canker thing will affect us," Carter said.

The state lost 83,540 acres of commercial citrus to the citrus canker eradication program before the 10-year program was declared a failure and halted in January, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture.

Florida growers are also dealing with a newly imposed federal ban on fruit shipments to citrus-producing states such as California. Ben Norris, a southwest Florida grower with about 1,000 acres, said he was able to get his Valencias harvested, but it cost him 50 percent more in some places.

"When you have problems like this at the end of this year," he asked, "what's it going to be like as we start this next crop?"