

Posted on Thu, Jun. 08, 2006

AGRICULTURE

Gov. Bush calls citrus shipping ban 'overkill'

Gov. Jeb Bush said a federal ban on shipping Florida citrus to other citrus-producing states goes too far. He said the state will appeal the decision.

By David Royse

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE - Florida will try to persuade federal officials to at least alter a plan that would ban Florida-grown fresh citrus from being shipped to other citrus producing states, Gov. Jeb Bush said Wednesday, arguing that the ban is "overkill" that doesn't make scientific sense.

On Tuesday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture barred Florida citrus from being shipped to the other states because of fears that canker and other diseases that have affected Florida fruit could spread.

INTERIM RULE

The agency issued an interim rule that prevents Florida fruit from being shipped to 11 states and territories: Alabama, American Samoa, Arizona, California, Guam, Hawaii, Louisiana, Northern Mariana Island, Puerto Rico, Texas and the Virgin Islands.

The ban's impact is minimized somewhat because it only applies to fresh fruit, Bush said.

And 90 percent of Florida oranges are made into juice. But Bush said the rule still doesn't make sense -- partly because it is too broad.

EXCEPTIONS SOUGHT

Bush used Texas as an example. Citrus is only grown in a small part of the state, so fruit shouldn't be banned from other parts where there's no danger of disease spreading, the governor said.

He also suggested that fruit from parts of Florida that are canker-free should be allowed to be shipped anywhere.

"A logical, science-based, research-based approach to this isn't to overkill but to suggest that in the areas where we don't have canker, there could be exports," Bush said.

"And we should be able to send those to places like Dallas, where within 500 miles there's not a citrus tree in sight."

Bush said state officials would appeal to federal officials to consider changing their rule.

"I'm disappointed that the Department of Agriculture in Washington has made this decision, but we're going to work with them to see if we can't get it modified," Bush said.

PAYMENTS TO FARMERS

Meanwhile on Wednesday, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced the availability of \$100 million to compensate Florida growers for losses from the effort to eradicate canker by removing trees.

Florida agriculture officials were caught off guard by the quarantine, which also puts stricter guidelines on shipping of the fruit that can be sold.

It's not clear how long the rule will last.

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson said Wednesday that fruit from non-infected areas doesn't spread the disease.

While the loss from the ban may be minimal now, Bronson said, growers are worried that it could be expanded.

"It's other countries . . . that we're dealing with in fruit that are also going to look at this and say, 'Whoa, wait a minute, if these five states are going to do this then maybe we ought to reevaluate,' " Bronson said.

GROWING PROBLEM

Canker is harmless to humans but makes fruit blemish and drop prematurely from the tree, making it harder to sell.

The hurricanes of the past two years have spread canker farther, and officials have given up trying to eradicate it and now are simply trying to contain it.

Previously, every tree within a 1,900-foot radius of one infected with canker was destroyed.