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HOMESTEAD

Farmers cry foul over wetlands penalties

South Miami-Dade farmers expressed outrage at sky-high mitigation fees on land designated as wetlands during an agribusiness forum.

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Farmers from across South Miami-Dade aired their gripes with the county and suggested ways to keep agriculture viable at a forum sponsored by the Dade County Farm Bureau Monday.

Among the farmers' chief complaints: taxes that they consider burdensome and cease-and-desist orders issued by the county's Department of Environmental Resources Management that potentially could put some nursery owners out of business.

The town hall meeting, held at South Dade Senior High, drew about 100 spectators and two dozen speakers who addressed a panel including Miami-Dade Commissioner Dennis Moss, Agricultural Manager Charles LaPradd, Acting DERM Director Carlos Espinosa and Planning and Zoning Director Diane O'Quinn Williams.

Several nursery owners said they have received notices from DERM that land they bought for farming is on wetlands inside what is known as the 8 ½ Square Mile Area, and inside the East Glade, an area east of U.S. 1 and south of Cutler Bay. DERM has told some farmers in those areas that they either have to shut down their farming operations or pay a mitigation fee, some as high as \$180,000.

Michelle Garcia, who purchased land at Southwest 157th Street and 209th Avenue a year ago, said she was never told the property she bought for a nursery was classified as wetlands. Garcia said she paid \$300,000 for the five-acre site and also received a \$150,000 loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to open Garcia's Garden nursery -- money she said she must now pay back.

"Why was the owner allowed to sell me property at fair market value when supposedly my property is worth nothing?" Garcia asked the panel.

DERM's Espinosa said many landowners like Garcia unknowingly purchased land classified as wetlands that have been developed as tree farms. He said his department is

trying to "adjust" the mitigation fees. Properties that have been continuously farmed prior to being classified as wetlands are exempt from the fees, he said.

But for many other farmers like Frances Salazar and Mercy Cantillo, who own Two Sisters tree farm just east of Biscayne National Park and bought their land after it had grown fallow, there is no exemption. They also have been served with a cease and desist order.

Other farmers said they had recently received notices from DERM ordering them to remove mulch that the agency says is contaminating land. The mulch was distributed for free following last years' hurricanes and contained agricultural debris.

"We do not want to create an undue burden on these people, but unfortunately at some point this material has to come out," Espinosa said.

Many farmers also griped about the increased number and costs of permits and fees that they are required to pay. Many also said they recently have lost the agricultural exemptions on their taxes.

Katie Edwards, executive director of the Farm Bureau, asked the panel to examine procedures for awarding property tax exemptions and to review permitting fees.

The most positive outlook for the future of farming in South Miami-Dade came from Peter Schnebly, of Schnebly Redland's Winery, who talked about the need to better market the area as a tourist destination.

Schnebly said a tour of the area is in the works, and suggested starting a culinary institute in the Redland to teach chefs about cooking tropical foods. He suggested funding could come from the \$60 million bed tax collected countywide.

Edwards said Tuesday that the response she got from farmers who attended the meeting was mostly positive.

"They were appreciative that they had a forum to address their concerns," she said. "But we will be looking to Commissioner Moss's leadership to ensure that it's not just a wasted effort and to put in place some of those recommendations."