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AGRICULTURE

Florida growers will get methods to cope

Commercial citrus growers in Florida will borrow techniques used elsewhere to deal with citrus canker.

By Georgia Tasker

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The decision by the federal and state governments to end the canker eradication program in Florida means commercial growers in the state will have to switch to techniques employed in other parts of the world to control the disease -- from using bacteria-killing sprays to building windbreaks to simply accepting the high costs of continuing to grow susceptible fruit.

Growers will soon get new regulations that will help guide the industry from "birth to death," said Stephen Poe, who is in charge of the canker program with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

That means all phases of an orange or a grapefruit's life -- from how the trees are grafted to how fruits are harvested, trucked and processed -- will have to follow carefully designed rules and regulations if Florida's citrus industry is to survive with canker in place.

SOUTH AMERICA

Other areas of the world have developed techniques for coping with citrus canker.

In citrus-growing parts of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay -- generally less humid and tropical than Florida and without hurricanes -- citrus growers deal with canker by planting windbreaks, using bacteria-killing copper sprays, removing severely infected trees and, in some cases, eradicating infested areas.

But in rainy, tropical Southeast Asia, some types of oranges simply cannot be grown because of high humidity, long growing seasons and tropical storms, said Harold Browning, director of the University of Florida's Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred and coordinator of the university's citrus programs.

'MANAGEMENT PLAN'

Day-to-day climate and outsized weather events such as hurricanes are the two things that dictate the way citrus canker must be handled, says Browning.

"Florida is between Southeast Asia, as the worst case, and South America," Browning said.

Poe characterized Brazil's citrus-growing techniques as "aggressive management programs."

He foresees development of a "comprehensive management plan" for the Florida citrus industry within the next few weeks -- much of it mandatory. It could include protocols for growing citrus seedlings, disease-controlling sprays, pruning dictates, even new processing standards.

Copper sprays, which keep the bacteria-caused disease in check, are used about four times a year now, Browning says. To use copper as a preventive to canker could require 10 or 12 annual sprays, which is economically unfeasible. Yet copper was used more often when Florida produced more citrus for the fresh market than for juice, so Browning thinks it is an "important tool" in the canker battle.

OPTIONS

Windbreaks will probably be phased into groves to prevent the further spread of canker.

Replanting trees lost to hurricanes may take longer. With the majority of small citrus trees killed by hurricanes, and others quarantined, it could be two years before disease-free saplings can go into the fields, Browning said.

An economic study of the citrus industry is under way, looking at production costs, development pressures, disease management and other variables that will be completed within about a month, Browning said. It also will look at the complication of the newest citrus disease, citrus greening.

Coupled with new industry management practices, growers will have a better picture of whether they can replant and repair groves.

"Being successful with some susceptible varieties will require our utmost attention and some cost," Browning said. "At the end of the day, it may be difficult for some varieties in the long term to be economical in Florida."