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## **Too little, too late for treeless citrus lovers**

**Homeowners across South Florida who lost beloved citrus trees to the state's canker eradication program said a decision to stop cutting trees within 1,900 feet of canker outbreaks comes too late.**

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News that the state has suspended much of its citrus eradication program drew a collective "Finally!" from South Florida residents who have long opposed it as an unlawful intrusion into their backyards.

But local homeowners who bore the brunt of the state's eradication efforts in residential areas now wonder what it was all for -- why their trees had to be buzz-sawed for a failed program.

"The only people that benefited from this were . . . the citrus industry," said Randy Arrowsmith of Pembroke Pines, who lost nine citrus trees because one had canker. The rest were doomed because of the 1,900-foot standard, requiring that trees within that radius of an infected tree be destroyed.

"The taxpayer paid to have trees cut out of his own backyard," Arrowsmith said.

Residents who lost trees said the new policy comes too late for them.

For years, Chris Tyson's morning ritual sent her into the backyard to handpick breakfast - - ruby red or seedless grapefruits, sometimes blood oranges, all from her favorite trees.

When citrus canker first hit the region, Tyson, a volunteer in Fairchild Tropical Garden's research department, had each of her 15 citrus trees inspected by the USDA. All were declared canker-free, she said.

Then one day she returned to her Coral Gables home to find that canker eradication workers had chopped them all down.

"I was livid," she recalled. "But there was nothing I could do about it -- they were all gone."

Several residents resisted the program as best they could, using lawsuits -- and, in some instances, dogs and shotguns.

A coalition of South Floridians and local governments joined forces in 2000 to challenge the program in court, arguing that it relied on shoddy science, suspect economics, and unlawful intrusion onto private property.

Fort Lauderdale retiree Jack Haire, one of several plaintiffs in the suit, said the decision to overhaul the program came as partial vindication. But with inspections expected to continue and intensify -- the hunt is still on for infected trees -- Haire said he isn't fully satisfied.

"I want them off my property, out of my life," he said. "They've been rude, arrogant, and thoughtless, and they've bungled this program."

Many commercial growers and some state officials take a different view, arguing that the program was on its way to removing canker until delays caused by homeowners' legal challenges allowed the blight to regain traction.

In 2003, state Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson blasted Broward County officials and argued that multiple delays caused by litigation were largely responsible for canker's spread.

Bob Blakely said he might have been more excited by the news if his trees -- two orange and one grapefruit -- weren't cut down from his Pembroke Pines home in 2001. The orange was infected, so they all had to go.

"They should have stopped that a long time ago," Blakely said. "I miss my grapefruit juice."

Some tree owners said they didn't realize what they had lost until it was gone. They missed the shade, the smell, the fresh juice in the morning.

And the fruitless trees that grew in place of the old citrus just weren't the same, said Davie resident Toby Bogorff, who lost one grapefruit and two orange trees.

"If you like having grapefruit and tangelos without pesticides on it, there's no replacing it," she said.

Lawsuits are pending in citrus counties across Florida, seeking compensation from the state for losses suffered by citrus tree owners.

For all the cheering brought on by the demise of the 1,900-foot rule, some residents said they hope the program won't die off altogether.

"The funding shouldn't stop," said Miguel Melgar, a Sweetwater resident who had four citrus trees cut down. "One by one, they should eradicate the trees with canker and keep the other ones alive."

Sidney Tough was upset when 54 trees in his Hialeah backyard were cut down but he disagrees with the government's decision to cut off spending.

"When you've got a problem," he said, "you've got to get rid of it."

Miami Herald staff writer Sara Olkon contributed to this report.