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CITRUS CANKER

Canker workers being laid off

Soon-to-be laid off workers in the war against citrus canker in South Florida are hanging up their uniforms.

By Phil Long

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Two weeks ago, citrus canker eradication workers such as Jose Felix Alvarez, Betty Lancey and Gloria Newton were busy roaming neighborhoods examining the leaves of orange, grapefruit and other varieties for signs of the disease or directing the crews that would cut down infected trees.

Now the former foot soldiers in the canker battle and their colleagues are attending job placement seminars, filling out unemployment compensation forms and cleaning out their files at the Plantation office on West Sunrise Boulevard, a nerve center of the unsuccessful 10-year effort to eradicate canker.

Like 500 other long-term "temporary" workers, Alvarez, Lancey and Newton have been laid off.

The program that cost taxpayers more than \$500 million over the past decade -- and could have cost \$1.5 billion more -- has lost its federal support and run out of money.

The residential eradication program comes to a halt Thursday, marking the end of a controversial era that saw more than 847,000 residential citrus trees, mostly in South Florida, chain-sawed by canker eradicators.

GETTING OUT

The fate of another 530 workers has yet to be determined, but one thing is clear: The government is getting out of the citrus canker eradication business.

State, federal and industry officials won't come up with a new plan for dealing with canker in commercial groves until at least March 1.

Alvarez, who lives in Biscayne Park, was hoping he could avoid a layoff, but he said he'll miss his job with the state.

"It was a very good environment among the workers and the managers" he said.

Like many others, Alvarez, Newton and Lancey began their careers in the program five or six years ago, figuring on working less than a year in a job that sent them into people's backyards inspecting orange, grapefruit, lime, tangerine and other citrus trees.

Each has since moved up the ladder. When the layoff notice came, Newton was making \$11.59 hourly, supervising a cutting crew. Alvarez and Lancey, who had more technical responsibilities, made \$14.85 hourly, screening and collecting leaves for diagnosis when surveyors found suspected canker.

There were no benefits, such as vacation, sick days or medical insurance. On rainy days, workers got two hours' pay for showing up and then were sent home.

Over the years, teams of inspectors or cutters were often unwelcome visitors at more than 200,000 residential properties, where they delivered the news that trees must be cut down. At one point, crews were dropping 5,000 trees a day. Every infected tree and every citrus tree within 1,900 feet had to go, the rule said.

CANKER HAS SPREAD

The disease was first discovered in 1995 on a tree in Miami-Dade County. It spread to 23 other counties.

A lawsuit temporarily slowed the cutting, but the Florida Supreme Court upheld the canker eradication law.

Hurricanes in 2004 and 2005 spread the disease beyond the point of control, agriculture officials concluded.

With more than 90,000 acres of commercial trees already condemned and with the potential loss of 180,000 more acres -- totaling more than a quarter of all commercial trees in the state -- the government and the industry decided to cut their losses. They will try to live with the disease.

Alvarez, Lancey and Newton say their dealings with the public were almost always decent, if not pleasant.

But some workers over the years have been berated by angry residents, and one crew was met by a property owner with a gun.

In the end, nature simply won the battle, Lancey said.

Where will the eradication workers go from here?

Alvarez, 64, who has a degree in accounting, said he loves working outdoors and plans to finish his landscape technology certificate at Miami Dade College.

Newton, 53, who lives in Davie, is a former teacher's aide who plans to return to work in cosmetology.

Lancey, 45, who lives in Tamarac, said she will likely search for a job with the Broward Sheriff's Office or the state's Department of Children & Families.