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AGRICULTURE

1,900-foot canker rule under review by state

TALLAHASSEE - (AP) -- A state law requiring the removal of trees within 1,900 feet of one infected with citrus canker is being reviewed by the Florida Department of Agriculture in the aftermath of four hurricanes.

The storms that struck Florida last year caused an estimated \$2.2 billion in damage to the state's crops and farming infrastructure and are also thought to have spread the disease that threatens the state's \$9 billion citrus industry. Agriculture officials estimated Wilma and Katrina could be responsible for spreading canker to 183,000 acres, or a quarter of the state's commercial citrus groves.

As the Agriculture Department tries to determine how far canker was spread by the hurricanes, growers have sought a less restrictive approach than the 1,900-foot law. They are trying to limit tree removals after already losing valuable trees to the hurricanes -- especially Katrina and Wilma.

Once canker is found in a grove, the state requires that citrus trees within a 1,900-foot radius be destroyed. Any change would have to be done by the Legislature.

"Is there is a possibility of a change? Yes, I'd say there is a possibility," agency spokeswoman Liz Compton said Sunday. "But we need information before we make that decision."

She said the 1,900-foot law hasn't been suspended.

"That's a law, not a policy, we can't just ignore it," Compton said. "Right now we're intensively cutting positive trees, but we've shifted resources to do intensive surveys to find out where the canker is before we make any decisions on the future of the program."

Two citrus growers from Polk County sued the state last month to challenge the constitutionality of the eradication program and its right to destroy property without paying compensation.

After a decade-long battle, state and federal agriculture workers had been close to eliminating citrus canker, which causes fruit and leaves to drop prematurely, but hurricanes the past two seasons have spread the disease to new areas in the heart of the state's citrus production.

Citrus canker is caused by bacteria that causes blemishes on fruit, making it harder to sell. It is harmless to humans.

The state has destroyed more than 800,000 residential trees in an effort to rid Florida of the disease.