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AGRICULTURE

Tree cutting slowed as canker policy is reviewed

With experts concerned about the effects of last hurricane season, trees marked for destruction in the state's citrus canker eradication program are getting a temporary reprieve.

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The state of Florida is adjusting its battle plan in the war on citrus canker.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is still destroying trees that show signs of the disease, but has temporarily stopped cutting those within a 1,900-foot radius of diseased trees.

The reason for the change: Last year's hurricanes may have spread canker so widely that the disease is unstoppable. For now, the state has decided the most effective policy is to focus on infected trees and not those merely "exposed" by being within 1,900 feet.

Infected trees will still be removed as quickly as possible, and the agency can't suspend the law that requires every citrus tree within 1,900 feet of a canker-infected tree to be removed, a spokesperson for the department said Monday.

Many state eradication workers have been reassigned to survey for new citrus outbreaks caused by canker bacteria driven through the air by Hurricane Wilma and landing well outside areas already infected in South and Central Florida.

State experts worry that the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005, particularly Wilma last October, could have spread the disease to an additional 180,000 acres of commercial citrus.

The thought of wiping out another 180,000 acres of citrus stunned the industry. Growers, regulators, state and U.S. agriculture officials have since been trying to find the right course on what to do about the eradication program.

Meanwhile, a temporary halt in cutting.

"If they are going to make a major change in the program, we don't want to be taking out trees only to change it the next day," said Liz Compton, spokesperson for the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. "I'd hate to be the guy who loses my grove today if there is going to be a change [in the program in] a week."

The decision to temporarily suspend cutting affects not only 26,000 acres of citrus awaiting destruction statewide, but also about 416,000 residential trees in yards from Palm Beach County to the Florida Keys.

Since the disease was first discovered on a tree in Miami-Dade County in 1995, it has spread to 23 other counties. More than 200,000 property owners have lost trees to the canker eradication program, most in South Florida.

Canker, harmless to humans, blemishes fruit and eventually weakens the tree, causing a loss in production, Compton said.

The eradication program is based on the theory that the only way to stop canker's spread is to remove every citrus tree within 1,900 feet of an infected tree.

Several South Florida residents and governments doubted that theory and fought unsuccessfully in court against the residential eradication program.

More than 800,000 residential trees -- most of them in South Florida -- have been cut down in the eradication program, as have almost eight million commercial trees.

If early predictions on hurricane Wilma's potential damage are true, that would mean the loss of about a quarter of the commercial citrus that was in Florida two years ago.