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Storms spread disease too far, state concludes

With USDA funding yanked, Florida abandoned its controversial citrus canker eradication program, saying hurricanes have spread the disease too far to wipe it out without destroying the citrus industry.

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Florida's citrus canker eradication program, reviled by homeowners and defended by industry officials for 10 years, ended Wednesday when the U.S. Department of Agriculture declared the battle unwinnable.

The 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons spread the disease across such a broad swath of commercial citrus groves that the USDA said, in a letter to the state, that it no longer believes canker bacteria can be wiped out without wrecking the industry the agency has been trying to protect.

The USDA immediately cut off funding to the program -- \$36 million so far this fiscal year -- and state officials now plan to shift focus from eradication to disease management. They set a March 1 deadline -- just before the state lawmaking session begins -- to draft a plan to control the disease with suppression techniques modeled after those used in other countries such as Brazil and Argentina.

"It was when the two years of storms came along -- eight storms came along -- that blew [the disease] out the window," said Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson. "Our containment area was just totally destroyed because it was leapfrogging in miles, not in hundreds of yards, but miles. . . . If the [eradication] cure is worse than the disease, do you still keep the cure going?"

Since 1994, the state and federal government have spent more than \$500 million on the program, according to Bronson, but in the next two years the amount could have totaled \$1.5 billion.

"There's been no fallacy in the program," he insisted. "It's just that the storms changed our approach."

The USDA decision means the Florida Legislature will have to rewrite the eradication laws, Bronson said. The state will continue to cut down infected trees, he said, but it will

stop destroying those within 1,900 feet of an infected tree, which under current law are considered "exposed."

GOVERNOR 'TROUBLED'

Gov. Jeb Bush said he was "troubled" by the USDA decision but remains determined to help citrus growers.

"The federal Department of Agriculture decision has incredible impacts on one of Florida's great industries," Bush said. "I'm not going to accept the notion the industry is dead because of canker. We are going to have to develop a policy of some kind to protect the citrus growers, to allow them to continue to grow their crop."

Canker is harmless to humans who eat the fruit or drink its juice. But the illness blemishes fruit, causing both fruit and leaves to drop prematurely. Most Florida oranges are not consumed as fruit; 85 percent to 90 percent are used for juice.

The eradication program took a vast toll on Florida's citrus trees. A total of 847,515 residential trees -- most in South Florida -- and 11.5 million commercial trees were destroyed, according to government figures. At the time, state and federal officials said it was the only way to save the citrus industry, which is expected to generate about \$1 billion in revenue this year.

With eradication no longer an option, Bronson said a new canker-suppression plan could include "any and all chemical products," defoliation and other techniques.

Growers said they came to the reluctant conclusion this fall that hurricanes had made wiping out canker impossible.

"Obviously as a grower, I wanted to eradicate canker," said Marty McKenna, a fourth-generation grower from Sebring and president of the state's largest grower organization, Florida Citrus Mutual. "But when Hurricane Wilma came through, it became obvious that the eradication program was more of a threat to the industry than canker."

After the hurricane season ended, state and federal agriculture officials met with growers to assess the spread of the disease. The news was grim: Preliminary estimates indicated 168,000 to 220,000 more acres of commercial citrus would have to be destroyed under the 1,900-foot rule. Citrus officials realized they could lose up to a quarter of their trees. At the end of the meetings, USDA scientists and global experts in citrus diseases concluded that "the disease is now so widely distributed that eradication is infeasible."

1,900-FOOT RULE

The 1,900-foot rule was probably the most hated part of the eradication plan from homeowners' perspective, because it allowed the state to cut down thousands of trees that were not yet infected but may have been exposed.

"This was a bonehead program," said Brian Patchen, 62, a Miami Beach resident who had six citrus trees cut down in his backyard in 2000. "It was doomed at the outset, and I think [the USDA] should have known that."

The decision to halt eradication efforts and funding did not surprise Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that our current eradication efforts are not working," she said. "The consensus from growers is that, as a nation, we need to relook at the science behind citrus canker eradication."

Bronson insisted the science was sound. Mother Nature -- two active hurricane seasons in a row -- was to blame.

"It's not that the 1,900-foot scenario of science wasn't working. It worked exactly like they said it would. . . ." he said. "It's just the storms created something much bigger than anybody dreamed of, from my standpoint."

Nat Roberts, general manager of Callery-Judge Grove near Loxahatchee, said he supported the USDA's move.

"I think that clearly a change had to be made," he said. "Clearly the hurricanes spread it, and when the scientists started talking about 200,000 more acres or whatever it is needing to be destroyed, that starts telling you that it's unsustainable."

Roberts, who lost 140 acres of citrus to the eradication program and laid off 200 people in his packing operation several years ago, said the state was on its way to solving the problem but was thwarted by legal challenges from South Florida homeowners.

"We were within . . . weeks of eradicating citrus canker from Florida," he said, echoing a common sentiment among the state's growers. "Actions have consequences. We left infected trees standing, exposed trees standing, and then it spread."

But opponents of the eradication program noted that the growers were all for the radical eradication plan -- until the program itself, rather than the disease, threatened to destroy the industry.

"Blaming legal delays and hurricanes for the failure of the eradication program is disingenuous and blatantly false," said Andrew Meyers, Broward County's chief appellate counsel and lead lawyer in a suit against eradication brought by a coalition of residents and governments.

"Any effort to effectively address the citrus canker issue was undermined by shoddy science and bureaucratic incompetence," he added.

"It is unfortunate that the constitutional rights of so many Floridians were senselessly trampled."

Miami Herald reporters Samuel P. Nitze, Jennifer Mooney Piedra, Gary Fineout and Mary Ellen Klas contributed to this report.