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# **Eradication is dead, but goal hasn't changed**

## **OUR OPINION: SAVING FLORIDA CITRUS IS WORTH THE EFFORT**

South Florida residents can be forgiven for responding with disbelief and sarcasm to the dramatic decision last week by the Florida Department of Agriculture to end the controversial canker-eradication program. After all, residents already have lost their beloved orange, grapefruit and tangerine trees. Now, the agriculture department says, "Oops, sorry about that; let's try something else."

Painful as this may be, the change is necessary and unavoidable. It represents a major adjustment in the department's 10-year battle to save Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry. With apologies to South Florida homeowners, this is what the statewide canker battle has always been about.

Yes, it is true that the agriculture department put the eradication campaign in a strait-jacket from the start by not understanding that, although the goal was to save the citrus industry, the road to success depended on winning the understanding and support of residents. The department failed miserably because of its jack-boot tactics. It later changed those methods, but change came too late. A bevy of lawsuits stalled eradication, dealing a killing blow just as canker was on the verge of being defeated. If the program had continued a little longer in 2000, "the disease wouldn't have been here in 2004," said Craig Meyer, deputy commissioner of agriculture.

Now, the department is launching a control-and-manage strategy. Attendees at a recent Orlando meeting of the International Citrus Canker Workshop concluded that "the disease is now so widely distributed that eradication is infeasible." This is what Chuck Conner, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, wrote in a letter to Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson.

Preliminary data show that as many as 220,000 acres of commercial citrus would have had to be destroyed under the eradication program's 1,900-foot protocol. Citrus growers said the industry could not survive a loss of that magnitude. Besides that, the federal government would have had to significantly increase its \$36 million annual appropriation to Florida, the state would have had to continue to pay out millions, and the already-damaged citrus-nursery program could not have produced enough new trees to replace those destroyed because of canker. To save the industry, the state and growers are settling on a management gambit.

The strategy puts the citrus industry in uncharted waters. The idea is to protect groves with windbreaks, anti-bacteria sprays and chopping trees down when necessary. Similar tactics have been used in Brazil, but Florida's weather is more humid, and it isn't known if the techniques will work here.

If control-and-manage does work, many residents may want to know: Why didn't the department use them from the start, thus sparing South Floridians the loss of their trees? The answer, of course, is that eradication -- complete elimination of the disease -- is the best solution. If a doctor believes a human cancer can be eliminated, that will be the first and best option. Prior to the latest outbreak, state agriculture officials have eliminated canker outbreaks dating back to the early 1900s.

Through the years, the industry has survived hurricanes, freezes, pests and foreign competition. But it has never had to live with canker. The control-and-manage program almost certainly will result in smaller annual yields, and the industry will have to develop new marketing campaigns to overcome concerns about blemished fruit, even though blemishes don't actually harm the fruit.

The goal -- saving Florida's citrus industry -- is worth the effort because the state's economic health hangs in the balance.