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**CITRUS CANKER**

# **Audit of failed program to cut citrus canker sought**

**BY PHIL LONG**

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A candidate for state agriculture commissioner and a consumer action group want the Legislature to audit the failed citrus canker eradication program.

"I am not laying any blame on anyone, but I think the Legislature still has an oversight role in the spending of tax dollars, and we are talking about a lot of money on a program that hasn't worked," said Eric Copeland, a Coral Gables Democrat, attorney and tax consultant who is challenging Republican Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson.

Copeland wants a nonpolitical, nonpartisan independent audit.

The information is available, said Terence McElroy, spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

"The program is constantly undergoing analysis, audit and other financial reviews, both by the state and federal governments as part of the cooperative agreement" between Florida and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he said.

In January the USDA said it would no longer fund its share of the controversial program. Over 10 years, the state and USDA spent more than \$500 million on the program, plus \$436 million in federal reimbursement to commercial growers who lost trees. The hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 spread the disease so far that it had become unstoppable, the USDA said.

Copeland and Florida Consumer Action Network executive director Bill Newton want details on the cost of the eradication effort so far, estimates of future costs of litigation and compensation, a cost-benefit analysis of the program, an investigation for fraud and a review of the method used in determining compensation.