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WAR AGAINST CANKER

Threat of statewide citrus quarantine

Growers are in a panic over the possibility of a federally imposed quarantine on fresh citrus from Florida, in response to the dreaded citrus canker.

LAKE ALFRED - (AP) -- The U.S. Department of Agriculture is contemplating putting the state under a canker quarantine, a decision that is vexing fresh citrus growers and shippers.

Officials from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will travel to Washington next week in attempts to dissuade USDA officials from a statewide quarantine.

Their alternative plan would require grove inspections 60 days before harvest and stricter sanitary procedures at the state's citrus packinghouses.

Fresh citrus growers "need to know right now," said Jay Clark, the interim director of Lakeland-based Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest growers representative. "That's why it's a panic going on."

HIGHER PROFITS

Although fresh fruit represents only 10 percent of Florida's citrus industry, Clark said it has a much larger economic impact because growers receive higher profits for fresh fruit.

In January, the federal government said the fight against canker was hopeless and yanked its funding for eradication efforts. The disease causes blemishes on the fruit and prompts it to drop prematurely, making it harder to sell.

Under the former eradication program, Florida set up quarantines over an area within a 3,800-foot radius of a canker discovery, an area covering up to roughly 500 acres in a commercial grove.

The quarantine meant no fresh citrus from that defined area could be shipped to a citrus producing state, such as California and Texas.

Fruit from the quarantined area could be shipped to a processor or a non-citrus state if it showed no symptoms of infection.

If a state quarantine is implemented, loss of the California market would hit tangerine and specialty citrus growers hardest. More than 70 percent of specialty citrus is sold as fresh each year.

Washington lawmakers said they have heard talk of a possible quarantine.

"We've heard there's been ongoing discussions," said Dan McLaughlin, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla.

USDA spokesman Ed Loyd confirmed those discussions.

"At this point we're looking to determine how we can help facilitate the shipping of citrus out of Florida on a continued basis with the current situation with canker," Loyd said. "There has not been a decision made yet."

ALTERNATE PLAN

Richard Gaskalla, the director of the Division of Plant Industry, presented the department's alternative plan Friday to the Citrus Canker Technical Advisory Task Force.

The plan would retain the current rules governing fresh fruit shipments inside and outside quarantine areas, increase government inspections of fresh fruit and tighten sanitation, he said.

According to the website of the plant industry division of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, citrus can be replanted in quarantine areas, which are counties south of Orange County, excluding Pinellas and Manatee County. Plants must be purchased from certified nurseries that are registered with the state. Those nurseries bring in plants from areas that aren't under quarantine and then resell them here.

Nurseries within the quarantined area can't sell citrus plants outside the quarantined area.

Action Line called several nurseries in Miami-Dade and Broward counties and most have citrus plants in stock.

For details, visit www.doacs.state.fl.us/pi/canker/maps.html.