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HURRICANE CLEANUP

Growers must remove debris piles

With USDA relief funding slow to arrive, the Redland is facing an ever-growing debris problem as local trash continues to pile up.

BY CHARLES RABIN

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Tons of kindling and other debris, mostly from commercial nurseries, still litter Redland roadways three months after Hurricane Wilma -- as financially strapped growers wait on federal aid that has yet to reach their pockets.

The elusive pot of gold: \$200 million in emergency agricultural cleanup money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

But the feds have yet to determine how to split up the money earmarked for 229 counties in storm-damaged states from Texas to Florida and in the Carolinas.

"The USDA is working to develop an administrative program to get the dollars out to the growers," said Ben Bolusky, statewide executive director of the Florida Nursery Growers & Landscape Association. "We expect such action in a matter of days."

Miami-Dade County officials say they can't wait much longer.

They've issued a warning to Redland nursery growers in the past two weeks, telling them the USDA money is for reimbursement, and that the trash needs to be hauled away as soon as possible or they may face fines.

"That is correct," said Charles Lapradd, the county's agricultural director. "It's still their responsibility to get rid of the stuff. And the [USDA] money is not always guaranteed."

It's a tough proposition for many growers still trying to find their way after being battered by Katrina and Wilma last year. The cost of hauling away debris -- much of which also includes roofing and fences -- can be astronomical.

Growers must hire their own trash collectors because the Miami-Dade County Department of Solid Waste does not haul away commercial debris.

John DeMott owns Alfa Foliage, a 200-acre tropical farm at 27000 SW 217th Ave. He said he lost half of his farm to the storms. His cleanup costs so far: \$72,135. And that doesn't include the \$70.75 the county charges per ton of waste at its dump sites.

"You have to make decisions as far as how you're going to spend your money," said DeMott. "Are owners going to mortgage their land and do it all over again? That's kind of a risk."

A drive through the Redland shows many of the growers are waffling on the cleanup. Almost every east-west artery west of 147th Avenue, from Southwest 216th to Southwest 312th streets, has large piles of vegetation on the roadside. Many of the piles have furniture, fencing and roofing piled on.

Otherwise, The Redland -- South Florida's most important agricultural hub -- looks like it always has: Neat rows of baby palms nestled near vegetable patches. Farmers steering old tractors very slowly along mostly barren roads. Wandering farm animals.

Miami-Dade County is the biggest nursery producer in the state. There are more than 1,200 nurseries in the county alone, the vast majority in the Redland roughly between Southwest 216th and 312th streets to the north and south and U.S. 1 and 202nd Avenue to the east and west.

Estimated losses from last season's storms are around \$1 billion. Waste pickup, in many cases, is not a major priority.

"There are a couple of things going on," said Marcelo Siqueira, who owns Altria Lab Plants in the Redland, a nursery that tests tissue cultures of exotic plants. "Growers have taken a very large hit and they're trying to keep businesses afloat and keep people hired."

In truth, the county and private haulers did a remarkable job picking up Wilma's debris. Most of the trash in Miami-Dade from the late October storm was gone by New Year's Day.

But some say that in its haste the county set a bad precedent: Many of the county-hired contractors -- in their rush to remove the waste -- hauled away everything in sight, including some commercial debris.

DeMott said when some growers saw that, they just started piling trash out on the street.

"You put the trash out there, and they came by and picked it up," he said.

Still, Lapradd's message to the growers was music to the ears of several homeowners who live among the nurseries.

Barbara Dailey said she's actually had to stop her vehicle to pour water on a trash pile, after spotting someone who tossed a lit cigarette out a car window. The season's unusual dryness is not helping matters.

"I used to drive people around to show them the beauty of the Redland. Now we keep 'em in our yard," she said. "The dry debris has all of us out here scared to death. And it's not even lightning season yet."