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AGRICULTURE

Florida, California fight over citrus exports

Florida and California are locked in a legal battle that could slow shipments of fresh California citrus to the Sunshine State.

By Phil Long

plong@MiamiHerald.com

California lemons, navel oranges and tangerines could become scarce on Florida supermarket shelves, at least for a while.

Florida has begun restricting imports of California fresh citrus, saying that without new inspections and treatment prescribed by Florida agricultural officials, California citrus peel could carry a fungus that might spread to Florida citrus trees, causing less fresh fruit to be suitable for shipping.

A group of California citrus interests has asked a Tallahassee court to block Florida from enforcing the quarantine. The Florida Department of Agriculture is acting, "in excess of its delegated authority and/or illegally, and/or with ignorance of the law, facts or the public good," the suit says.

California ships about 4.5 million 38.5-pound cartons of fresh fruit to Florida each year, valued at about \$75 million, according to the suit.

At least one California industry leader questions whether the regulations are retaliation for his state's opposition to allowing fresh Florida citrus into California because of concerns over citrus canker.

Under recent U.S. Department of Agriculture canker rules, Florida has been allowed to ship fresh fruit anywhere in the United States except California and other citrus-producing states. Even though Florida and the USDA believe there is only a negligible chance canker bacteria could survive on citrus peel that has been inspected, washed, disinfected and packaged in a commercial packinghouse, the ban for shipments to other citrus-producing states continues. The fungus under debate now, *septoria citri*, stains fresh fruit but, like canker, is harmless to humans.

The inspection and chemical treatment, along with other standards Florida is requiring California to adopt, are necessary to protect Florida growers from the fungus, which could jeopardize the state's sale of oranges to Korea, said Richard Gaskalla, head of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service's pest and disease control unit.

Korea requires California to follow *septoria citri* control measures similar to those Florida wants to impose on California fruit. Florida's new measures grew partly out of concern that Korea might impose restrictions on Florida if *septoria* became established here.

The Korea controls, which have been in effect in California for four years, apply only to oranges from two of California's biggest citrus-producing counties. Florida's regulations apply to all citrus in all California counties.

"We're deluged with citrus pests and diseases. We don't need anything else," Gaskalla said. There are "a lot of unanswered questions about this disease."

Florida has been accepting California fresh fruit for 50 years and there is no indication the disease has ever been transmitted to Florida, the California lawsuit says.

"I think it is a retaliatory move because of our opposition on the Florida canker proposal. . .," said Joel Nelsen, executive director of California Citrus Mutual, one of the plaintiffs in the suit.

"If we wanted to be retaliatory we'd say, 'Don't send us any fruit,' " Gaskalla said in an interview before the lawsuit was filed. "They are not letting any of our fruit in. This is just one of many certification programs we have in place to let product into our state but make sure that it is pest- and disease-free."

Florida first set Dec. 1 as the deadline to block the import of California fresh fruit that has not met the new rules. Then Florida moved the deadline to Dec. 8.

No California growers or shippers have yet been certified by the California Department of Food and Agriculture to ship fresh citrus to Florida.

Negotiations have been under way this week to modify some of the requirements and Nelsen said some growers and shippers may meet the standards and begin shipping.

But that will not stop the lawsuit, Nelsen said.

"I think we're a little incredulous that California is asking us to take a chance to take on yet another disease," said Liz Compton, a spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

"We're fighting citrus canker and greening," she added.

"We've only asked them to do what Korea has asked them to do to protect their industry."