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Citrus disease greening advances further in Florida

The Associated Press

LAKELAND, Fla. --

A disease that kills trees and ruins fruit has moved into another of Florida's top citrus-producing counties, authorities said Wednesday.

The discovery in Hardee County means citrus greening is now affecting trees in four of the top five production areas from last season. Those areas accounted for 60 percent of Florida citrus in 2005-06, federal data shows.

Greening, first discovered in-state in September 2005, has now spread to two-dozen citrus-producing counties, according to Florida Citrus Mutual, a grower advocacy group. It has still not shown up in the top area, Polk County.

Greening is spread by an insect, and can be active two years before detection. Physical signs include blotchy leaves and misshapen fruit, and eventually the disease kills plants. It does not affect humans, but makes fruit taste bitter.

"Growers are doing all they can to manage this disease but the key to beating it once and for all is research," Michael W. Sparks, executive vice president/CEO of Florida Citrus Mutual, said in a written statement. "We're moving in that direction but we must continue."

Officials said greening probably arrived in Florida from infected Asian plant material.

It is different from citrus canker, a disease spread by wind and rain that does not kill plants.

The Florida Department of Agriculture is holding grower education meetings around Florida in the coming weeks to share information about managing diseases. The first was in Bartow on Wednesday, and others will take place in Fort Pierce, Immokalee, Sebring, Arcadia and Tavares.

Citrus greening found in Hardee County

The state's citrus industry said citrus greening disease -- also known as Yellow Dragon Disease -- has been found for the first time in Hardee County.

The disease was found in a commercial grove just north of the DeSoto County line, said trade group Florida Citrus Mutual. Hardee County is the state's sixth-largest citrus producing county.