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CITRUS

Citrus fruit shipping standards eased

Florida's citrus growers got a break Friday when the U.S. Department of Agriculture approved new citrus canker inspection rules.

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VERO BEACH --

In a boost for troubled Florida growers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is easing citrus canker-related harvesting restrictions on fresh fruit.

The ruling, which shifts the burden of canker inspection from the grove to more intense inspection at the packinghouse, has multimillion-dollar implications for Florida growers and came despite opposition from another major citrus producing state: California.

California citrus producers are concerned that the disease, which is harmless to humans, could live on the blemished peel of fresh-shipped fruit and, if it made it to California, or other citrus-producing states, it could infect trees there.

The USDA believes that the chances of spreading the disease on fruit that has been disinfected, washed, sampled and inspected at a packinghouse is negligible.

Nevertheless, the new rules continue to block shipment of fresh Florida citrus to states like California, Arizona and Texas that also grow citrus.

The change, "will enable Florida growers to maintain, and possibly increase, the amount of fresh citrus shipped to eligible states while providing the same level of protection against the spread of citrus canker," Bruce Knight, under secretary for USDA's marketing and regulatory programs, said in a statement released Friday.

"We applaud the USDA for making a measured decision on this rule," Michael W. Sparks, executive vice-president and CEO of Florida Citrus Mutual, a statewide grower organization, said in a written statement. "Without this type of rule we might lose the entire Florida fresh citrus industry."

Sparks' counterpart on the West Coast, Joel Nelsen, executive director of the California Citrus Mutual, called the new rule: "Disappointing."

Under the old guidelines, if federal inspectors found even one tree with canker, a grower was barred from shipping any fruit from that stand of trees. The amount disqualified could include many acres.

Farmers could sell fruit from that stand of trees to the cannery for a fraction of its fresh value, growers say, or export it to Japan, but it could not go into the domestic fresh fruit market outside of Florida.

Under the new rule, growers will harvest fruit from the noncanker infected trees in a grove, so long as no fruit with canker lesions makes it into the packinghouse.

California citrus interests argued unsuccessfully to the USDA that if Florida were to be allowed to ship under the new rules, fruit should be confined to northern states east of the Mississippi, during a two-year pilot program to reduce the chance of any of it reaching California while the industry evaluated the new protocol.