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Beetle could wipe out avocado crop, growers warn

County leaders work to prevent infestation

By Chuck Rabin

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In a little over a year, the Ambrosia Beetle has made its way down the eastern seaboard, now threatening South Florida's avocados -- the areas most important fruit crop that is exported as far away as Alaska.

Though the crop is currently sound, Miami-Dade agricultural leaders tried a little preventative medicine Tuesday, warning commissioners of the dangers of the fungus carried by the beetle no bigger than Abe Lincoln's nose on the copper penny, and saying it could wipe out the crop entirely.

"I didn't think it could make it down this far this quickly," said county agricultural Director Charles Lapradd.

There are 500 growers in Dade who work out of 28 packing houses, mostly on 20-acre farms. In all, avocado farms cover about 7,000 acres in South Dade. The bug was first spotted in South Carolina over a year ago, and is making its way south through the passage of fire wood.

It was detected in Jacksonville in 2007, and seen in Melbourne last month. Apparently, avocado trees burn very well.

"Man has done that," pathologist Randy Ploetz said of the bugs movement. "People cut down trees for fire wood. It's going to be here on our door step pretty soon."

County commissioners quickly moved to add a request for funding from the state in a legislative package that will make its way to Tallahassee shortly. Commissioners Katy Sorenson, Barbara Jordan and Dennis Moss offered various amounts as a start, from their discretionary funds.

Lapradd said at least \$256,000 is immediately needed to study the effects of the fungus and to learn how to eradicate it. The county will work with the University of Florida, private growers and pathologists to try to rid itself of the bug.

"It has moved south very quickly," said Ploetz.