

Posted on Fri, Dec. 16, 2005
AGRICULTURE

Did Wilma spread canker?

In a new blow to citrus growers, a USDA study says that Hurricane Wilma spread citrus canker far and wide, and as a result millions more trees may need to be destroyed.

BY PHIL LONG
plong@herald.com

VERO BEACH - The winds from Hurricane Wilma may have spread citrus canker so widely that it could result in the destruction of as many as 170,000 more acres of fruit trees in commercial groves, state citrus officials said Thursday.

The estimate is based on a preliminary study given to state and citrus industry leaders this week by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"I was stunned," said Craig Meyer, deputy agriculture commissioner and the state's top citrus canker-eradication official. He heard the news at a meeting of growers, state and federal eradication specialists earlier this week.

If the report's predictions come true, millions more trees will have to be destroyed through the eradication program because they are either infected or stand within 1,900 feet of an infected tree. The eradication plan is based on the premise that the only way to get rid of the disease is to cut and burn infected trees and those nearby.

Meyer said the USDA preliminary study, which he said included more than one scenario, suggests that the spread at worst may force the state to take out anywhere from 70,000 to 170,000 additional acres of citrus fruit south and east of Lake Okeechobee. That would raise to about 265,000 the number of acres that must be bulldozed in the controversial program. There are about 750,000 commercial acres of citrus in the state now.

Dan Richey, Vero Beach grower and co-chair of the federal-state citrus canker task force, said he has no reason to doubt the preliminary report, but added it is too early to judge the effect of the latest news.

Any disease spread by the Oct. 24 hurricane will not start showing up on trees until early next year.

Citrus growers will meet next week to map strategy, perhaps urging changes in the eradication program and the 1,900-foot rule.

The industry faces other threats, including urban encroachment on groves and the potentially devastating disease known as citrus greening.

"The way we are practicing in this industry now has got to change," Richey said. "We have got to react to the set of cards that Mother Nature has delivered to us."

Nevertheless, the USDA results "should not come as a big surprise to anybody. It is not rocket science," he said.

Since Wilma hit, growers and government experts have been worried that the storm's 85- to 100-mph winds picked up canker bacteria and flung it far and wide.

Knowing the amount and location of exposed trees still standing when Wilma hit, Richey said, "it didn't take a real genius to figure out we were in probably in trouble."

The report has not changed the state's eradication program.

"There is a rumor out there that we have ordered our crews to stop cutting. Well, that is incorrect," said Liz Compton, spokeswoman for Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson.