

Posted on Wed, Dec. 07, 2005
AGRICULTURE

Millions still due in citrus removal

Homeowners who lost trees to Florida's canker-eradication program are awaiting the result of a request for an additional \$17 million to clear the backlog.

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If you're one of the more than 8,000 South Florida residents owed money by the state's canker-eradication program, your fate is in the hands of the Legislature. But you'll get your money -- eventually -- state officials say.

The Florida Department of Agriculture has asked the Legislature for \$17 million to clear up a backlog of payments to 46,000 people statewide who've lost trees to the canker eradication program, mostly since February.

The money would allow for payments through the end of June in the state's two residential canker-eradication reimbursement programs, said Craig Meyer, deputy agriculture commissioner and head of the canker program.

When the Legislature takes up the request remains to be seen. It is not on the agenda for this week's special session in Tallahassee. The next opportunity is in the regular session in the spring.

But the department is keeping a list of property owners due money, Meyer said.

"When we get the money, we pay," he said.

There are two residential programs with two different funding sources, Meyer said. So far the state has paid out about \$39 million to homeowners who have lost trees.

WAL-MART VOUCHER

In the first program, whenever the state removes a citrus tree as a result of the eradication program, the property owner gets a \$100 Wal-Mart voucher. The Wal-Mart project is funded mostly by the federal government, Meyer said, and the money has not been forthcoming this year like it has in the past.

In the second program, the property owner gets a \$55 check from the state for each citrus tree taken after the first one. That project has been funded by the Legislature with only enough money this year to reimburse for trees cut through the end of October.

HIGHER COSTS

The money in the \$55 program "was depleted faster than we anticipated early on because of the large number of property owners impacted by canker spread as a result of the 2004 hurricanes," said department spokesperson Liz Compton. "We had anticipated getting more federal money for [WalMart vouchers] but given the amount the federal government has spent on eradication, the request was denied," she said.

The state and federal governments have spent more than \$468 million in an effort to eradicate canker. That has resulted in the destruction of more than 843,000 residential trees, mostly in South Florida, and more than 12.1 million commercial trees.

Besides the costs of eradication and residential tree replacement, the federal government has paid out or budgeted more than \$250 million for commercial growers out of an estimated \$400 million in claims.