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CITRUS CANKER

45,000 trees must be destroyed

State agricultural inspectors have ordered the destruction of about 45,000 citrus trees in St. Lucie County because of citrus canker, which has spread to new groves.

BY SUSAN SALISBURY

Palm Beach Post

Citrus canker has been discovered in two additional commercial citrus groves in northern St. Lucie County, state agriculture officials said Monday. And in a nearby grove where canker was found last week, about 45,000 trees will have to be destroyed.

The roughly 360 acres of grapefruit and orange trees scheduled to be removed from the Capron Trail Grove produce 175,000 boxes of fruit worth more than \$1.5 million a year in a normal season, said J. Kevin Bynum, manager of Vero Beach-based Premier Citrus, which owns the grove.

The news added concern to a citrus-growing season that has been anything but normal. Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne took as much as 80 to 90 percent of the fruit in Florida's world-renowned Indian River Citrus region, which stretches from West Palm Beach north to Daytona Beach.

Besides destroying the crop, the hurricanes of August and September spread the canker infection, agriculture officials have said. Citrus canker is a bacterial disease that badly blemishes fruit, making it unfit for sale, and eventually makes the trees weak and unproductive.

The state's current canker outbreak began 10 years ago in Miami-Dade County and has led to the destruction of more than 3.2 million infected and healthy residential and commercial citrus trees.

Last week, state canker officials identified 38 canker-infected trees in the 3,000-acre grove west of Interstate 95 in northern St. Lucie County. State rules require all citrus trees within 1,900 feet of an infected tree to be destroyed.

On Monday, the number of infected trees in Capron Trail was increased to 59. Meanwhile, 42 infected trees were found in the Kanawha Groves west of Capron Trail, and one infected tree was identified in the Gracewood Fruit Co. grove to the west of Kanawha, said state Agriculture Department spokeswoman Denise Feiber.

Workers already have begun taking out the trees at Capron Trail.

Philip "Flip" Gates Jr., whose family owns the Kanawha Groves, said Monday the state told him it would initially remove 627 trees from his 350-acre grove, but the final count has not been determined. The grove's output was minimal this year because of the hurricanes.

Premier Citrus, one of the 10 largest citrus growers in the state, owns 18,000 acres of citrus in

Indian River, St. Lucie, Okeechobee and Osceola counties, Bynum said.

"It's been a rough year between the declining fruit prices the last several years, two back-to-back hurricanes and canker on top of that," he said. "It has to be a collective effort to stop this disease. . . . We need everyone's help and attention to identify and contain canker and eradicate it."

Bynum said that although Premier manages the Cobb Grove in southern Indian River County where more than 2,000 trees were removed in January due to canker, the disease was not spread to Capron Trail by workers or equipment.