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CITRUS INDUSTRY

Growers seek federal help to recover canker losses

Citrus growers whose trees are being bulldozed or burned because of canker are looking for federal financial help to recoup losses.

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FORT PIERCE - Slammed with two hurricanes last fall that stripped 90 percent of the fruit from many of his trees, Kevin Bynum finds the New Year has brought dreaded citrus canker and the certain bulldozing and burning of 1,400 acres of prime grapefruit northwest of Fort Pierce.

"That's a one-two-three punch," Bynum said Monday as smoke from burning trees wafted through the groves. "It's pretty devastating."

On Monday, a Florida Department of Agriculture official said the number of trees that will have to be destroyed because of the latest canker outbreak in several area groves will top 300,000.

LEADERS MEET

Bynum's concerns came in a break during a meeting with two Florida congressmen he and other area citrus leaders are hoping will help commercial growers recoup some of their losses.

The industry is asking for \$45 million.

In a tight budget year, that will be tough, Republican Reps. Mark Foley, of West Palm Beach and Dave Weldon, of Melbourne, told the growers. But they are willing to lead the charge.

Although the Florida congressional delegation has been able to get funding to offset a portion of lost production and tree replacement cost in the past, it may be more difficult now because Florida's powerful StPetersburg-area Republican, Rep. Bill Young, no longer chairs the House Appropriations Committee.

Destruction is the only way, citrus officials say, to stop the dreaded tree disease that blemishes fruit and weakens the tree but is harmless to humans.

The hurricanes of 2004 spread the canker, Greg Carlton, chief of the Bureau of Pest Eradication and Control, told growers at the meeting.

Since Aug. 12, just before Hurricane Charley hit the west coast, the state has put 8,861 acres of citrus -- 1.2 million trees statewide -- on the chopping block. About half of the trees have been removed. Hurricanes Jeanne and Frances devastated the east coast.

Since the outbreak began in 1995, there have been almost 699,000 residential trees removed and just over three million commercial trees, most of them in south central and southwest Florida.

WITHIN 1,900 FEET

In nearly all cases they weren't removed because they were infected but rather because they were within 1,900 feet of an infected tree.

Bulldozers on Monday were uprooting 10- to 13-year-old high-production groves. That's about 10 percent of Premier Citrus' groves in the state, said Bynum, one of the owners.

After the trees are gone, the land must lay unplanted for a year to two years depending on the citrus crop the grower wants to replant. After that, it takes a minimum of five to seven years for trees to produce enough fruit to make it profitable to pick.

So far the USDA has paid Florida commercial growers about \$104 million in tree replacements and reimbursement for lost production since 1995 when the latest outbreak began in Miami-Dade County.