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COVER STORY

## Citrus growers gearing up for canker issues

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Florida's farmers have a range of issues they hope to sway the Florida Legislature on this year, ranging from increased property rights to sales tax exemptions.

Orange and grapefruit growers have two big issues related to citrus canker, which is rapidly spreading through the state's groves.

One is making sure that there is enough state money to keep removing infected trees, said Casey W. Pace, spokeswoman for Florida Citrus Mutual, the growers' association.

"Since canker keeps appearing in different places, we want to ensure there's enough funds for eradication programs," she said, adding that the special \$6 million allotment approved in December may not be sufficient.

The other issue promises to be more cantankerous: the question of how many trees should be destroyed around an infected tree. The current 1,900-foot radius guideline, which expires July 1, sparked lawsuits by South Florida homeowners angered that they had to cut down healthy trees located within that boundary.

The Florida Supreme Court eventually upheld the 1,900-foot radius, but many in the citrus industry blame the legal battle for holding up the eradication program and allowing the disease to spread north to the large citrus groves.

Farmers also are lobbying for another eradication -- that of the 2.5 percent sales tax on agricultural equipment, which would put Florida on a level playing field with Georgia, Louisiana and other states. If the tax were abolished, the state would lose \$14 million in revenue, said Towson Fraser, spokesman for the House of Representatives. "The budget's in good shape this year, so it might be a decent year to get that through," he said.

Farmers are also looking to amend and resubmit the "agricultural enclave" bill, which Gov. Jeb Bush vetoed last year, citing the need for clearer terms.

The bill would give owners of agricultural land that is 75 percent surrounded by development the right to develop their property in the event of rezoning.