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AGRICULTURE

Canker worries spread

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ORLANDO - Worried that Hurricane Wilma may have spread citrus canker to the point of no return, experts are pouring over storm data, hoping it will show them where to look first for the next canker outbreak.

If Wilma spreads canker as much as the hurricanes of 2004 did, the disease might be unstoppable, perhaps changing Florida's citrus industry forever, said Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services scientist and canker expert Tim Schubert.

"We will not win if we continue to have weather patterns like this," Schubert said, following a recent meeting of canker and citrus greening scientists in Orlando.

Canker, harmless to humans, blemishes fruit and weakens the tree, eventually reducing production, citrus experts say. It's a threat to the state's \$9 billion commercial citrus industry. One of the main ways it spreads is by wind-driven rain, so hurricanes can wreak havoc.

ERADICATION PROGRAM

The state's eradication program is based on the theory that cutting down every infected citrus tree and every other citrus tree within 1,900 feet will stop the spread of the disease, Schubert said.

Experts say there is no alternative to eradication yet. Though research is underway, as of now, there is no chemical spray, treatment or other effective cure for the tree disease, they say.

Schubert says the industry needs a few dry years to make significant progress in eradicating the disease. But meteorologists predict busier than usual hurricane seasons for several years.

"We know where it was before Wilma," said Andy LaVigne, executive director of the state's largest citrus grower's association, Florida Citrus Mutual. If Wilma caused another big spread, "then we've got to look at whether it is still feasible to eradicate canker using the 1,900-foot eradication program or whether it has gotten to the point we have to figure out a different direction."

The weather analysis, which will be completed by January, will help tell experts where to look. However, because it takes a while for the disease to show up on leaves, it will likely be early spring before the first evidence of new canker is found on trees and summer before a full survey determines the extent of the spread.

Craig Meyer, Florida's deputy agriculture commissioner in charge of the eradication program, said he was concerned about the effects of this year's hurricanes, but "I am not going to react one way or the other until all the facts are in."

SPREAD BY PEOPLE

Besides being spread by wind-driven rain, canker can also be moved about by people taking diseased trees into uncontaminated areas and by going into and out of groves without properly decontaminating themselves and their equipment.

The canker eradication program has been responsible for the destruction of more than 800,000 residential citrus trees (most in Miami-Dade and Broward counties) and more than 12 million commercial trees. It has

cost nearly \$500 million to fight the disease over the last decade. Now it has spread toward the heart of the citrus belt.

The economic implications of a spreading canker outbreak are potentially serious. If the disease is unchecked or the eradication process stopped, then a lucrative European export market could be closed because European growers don't want to risk introducing the disease to trees in Spain, Italy and Portugal, Schubert said.

RESTRICTED IMPORTS

In addition, other citrus-producing states could decide not to import fresh fruit from Florida. With more and more fruit unusable for fresh shipment, more would go to juice plants, driving down prices as the supply grew.

Scientists have been working on developing canker-resistant varieties of fruit, either by traditional breeding techniques or genetic engineering, Schubert said.

If such a breakthrough happened today, he said, it could be a decade before enough testing is done to put such a plant on the market.

"It would be foolish to step back and let the [canker] trample us," Schubert said.