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## AGRICULTURE

# USDA aids Florida's canker fight

**Florida's citrus canker eradication program for commercial groves will get more financial help from the federal government.**

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There is good news for Florida citrus growers from the U.S. Department of Agriculture: a pledge of almost \$54 million to help fight the spread of citrus canker in commercial groves.

The grant brings to about \$114 million the combined state and federal financial spending this year to battle the disease that threatens the industry.

Since the latest outbreak of citrus canker was discovered in Miami-Dade County in 1995, the disease has spread to 24 counties.

It has cost state and federal governments \$442 million in eradication costs, said Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services spokesperson, Liz Compton.

USDA Secretary Mike Johanns met with growers in Florida in June and pledged to work to get the emergency grant that will help pay for inspections and tree removal.

"We are very, very excited about it and grateful," Craig Meyer, the state deputy agriculture commissioner in charge of the canker eradication program, said of the grant announced Friday.

"It shows strong, strong federal support for the eradication program."

Canker blemishes fruit, weakens the tree and reduces production, citrus officials say. The only way the state has found to eradicate it is to destroy each infected tree and every citrus tree within 1,900 feet.

That policy has caused the destruction of about 6.5 million commercial trees and slightly more than one million residential trees.

The residential eradication program has been controversial, especially in South Florida, where homeowners went to court in an unsuccessful bid to halt the widespread removal of supposedly exposed citrus trees in the 1,900-foot zone.

Many residential owners have sued to receive more than the \$100 Wal-Mart voucher they receive for the first tree taken and \$55 each in state checks for the remaining trees removed.

Those cases are awaiting trial.

The \$53.75 million in federal money cannot be used to reimburse growers for the trees they lost, Meyer said. That money comes from another USDA source and is subject to congressional funding.

No decisions have been made yet for this year on those payments.