

Posted on Mon, Sep. 26, 2005

## AGRICULTURE

# Money to replace canker trees runs out

The state's voucher program to replace your citrus tree is out of money.

BY Susan Salisbury

The Palm Beach Post

Wondering why you haven't received the \$100 Wal-Mart voucher for your backyard citrus tree, which was taken out by the state's canker program?

You can stop wondering.

The voucher is not in the mail.

The state's Shade Florida voucher program is out of money and has been for about seven months, state officials said.

That leaves about 10,000 homeowners out of luck, at least for now, said Liz Compton, a spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Agriculture.

For residents who have been patiently waiting to receive the vouchers to buy trees to replace their uprooted orange, grapefruit or lime trees, the situation is frustrating.

"Our Key lime tree was taken on Valentine's Day," said Martha Goldstein, a homemaker who lives in the Island Lakes development west of Boca Raton and has yet to receive her state voucher.

Canker hot-line clerks in Miami told Goldstein in July that the family's voucher was on "indefinite hold" because there was no money, she said.

Next, another canker hot-line clerk in Tallahassee told her the money had been appropriated and the voucher would be going out by the first week in September.

She still has received nothing, but has not had a chance to call back.

"I went out and bought a bougainvillea to put in. That, I had to pay for with my own money," Goldstein said.

State Rep. Mary Brandenburg, D-West Palm Beach, said she has received at least one phone call a week from residents upset about not receiving their vouchers.

"The whole purpose for the citrus voucher program is to replace the tree canopy, for assorted reasons, environmental and aesthetic," she said. "If you take a tree, you want to have a tree placed back in. The voucher program was the way to make sure that would happen."

The program began in 1999 with \$3 million in state money.

That ran out in 2000, after which the U.S. Department of Agriculture provided a further \$15 million.

More than 213,000 homeowners have participated in the program, and some didn't use the entire voucher amount, Compton said.

"The feds have said, 'No more,' " she said.

Shade Florida depleted its federal outlay in February, but the state prepared 6,000 additional vouchers in the hope that money would become available, she said.

Workers stopped processing voucher requests in July, but has those residents' information in its computers, ready to begin the paperwork if money can be found.

"We have thousands more people than we anticipated pre-hurricanes," Compton said.

The 2004 hurricanes caused additional canker outbreaks, pushing the number of trees needing to be cut to 240,000, up from 160,000, in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties alone.

In the rest of the state, an additional 100,000 residential trees made it to the infected or exposed list, state Department of Agriculture spokesman Mark Fagan said.

Compton said officials are hoping to tap \$5.4 million in state money devoted to a "second tree" compensation fund that is still issuing \$55 vouchers. That money cannot be shifted to Shade Florida without action by the legislature.

"This is a technical legal glitch. We hope to get it resolved," Compton said.

Brandenburg said she would like her fellow legislators to act "immediately."

"If we had just stamped out citrus canker when it first popped up, we would not be talking about this problem," she said. "It is a tragedy. The whole thing is just awful."