

From The Miami Herald, Business Section, Posted on Tue, Jan. 25, 2005

AGRICULTURE

Citrus canker spreads across state

LAST YEAR'S HURRICANES HELPED TO REVEAL HOW FAR CANKER HAS SPREAD IN FLORIDA'S CITRUS GROVES

BY SUSAN SALISBURY

The Palm Beach Post

Just about every citrus industry meeting opens with a prayer, but grower Stan Carter's invocation at a Jan. 13 Indian River Citrus League board meeting in Vero Beach was somewhat unusual.

"We know that not a sparrow falls to the ground that you don't know about. We respectfully ask you take your eyes off the dadburn sparrows and put them on the citrus industry," said Carter, citrus division manager for McArthur Farms in Port St. Lucie.

His plea was understandable.

A brutal hurricane season stripped the state's citrus growers of close to 70 percent of their grapefruit and 28 percent of their oranges, based on a comparison of this year's forecast with the last three seasons. The grapefruit harvest will be the smallest harvest since the season of 1935-36.

But the worse news was yet to come: The hurricanes spread citrus canker.

Canker was found for the first time in St. Lucie County, the state's top grapefruit producer, in December. Then, the disease was found in a 27-acre grapefruit grove in Indian River County, the second-highest producer.

So far, the state has found no additional cases. But officials and growers are on heightened alert after the state revealed this month that the hurricanes of August and September had spread the disease.

If those finds are confined, the prognosis for the industry is good, growers say. If those outbreaks have spread, the impact could ruin an industry that supports 20 percent of the jobs on the Treasure Coast.

"If we get extremely lucky, . . . the impact will not be that dramatic," said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League, which represents 950 growers from West Palm Beach to Daytona Beach.

One result of the new outbreaks: The projected deadline for the state to have eradicated canker will be extended a year or so.

"We had anticipated being finished by January 2006," Deputy Agriculture Secretary Craig Meyer said. "Now, we won't be done until at least 2007."

ERADICATION EFFORTS

The state hopes to have destroyed canker in outlying areas by the end of February, with the exception of Orlando. By July, eradication efforts will be concentrated in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. Cutting is projected to be stepped up from 1,000 trees a week to 3,000.

"Our strategy is to stop canker from moving northward from Palm Beach County," he said. "We are going to

get the disease from the north and push back to the south."

If there is a silver lining to the hurricanes, Meyer said, it's that now canker surveyors know where to look for the disease.

"Over the last four or five years, people have been moving plants out of Southeast Florida that were not visibly infected, or were infected and they did not know it," he said. "The hurricanes have stirred it up. Hopefully, the hurricanes have stirred it all up."

The state has been fighting this specific canker infestation since September 1995, when the bacterium was discovered in a residential neighborhood in Miami-Dade County. Since then canker has been detected in 19 more counties, and more than 3.2 million trees have been removed in an attempt to stop the disease.

Before hurricanes set back the canker program, lawsuits caused delays.

Homeowners challenged the state's rule requiring any citrus tree, even if healthy, within 1,900 feet of an infected tree to be cut down.

Legal challenges caused cutting to be halted or limited until March 2004, when it resumed after the Florida Supreme Court upheld the rule.

"Our belief is that we would not be involved in these eradication programs around the state if we had not been stopped," Meyer said.

That sentiment is widespread in the citrus industry, where people feel the lawsuits allowed canker to spread.

"Had you dealt with this problem in Miami, you would have affected 5,000 or 10,000 homes," said Nat Roberts, general manager of Callery-Judge Grove near Loxahatchee. "You would never have created the place from which to infect everybody else."

THE DISEASE

Citrus canker is not harmful to humans, but it scars fruit and eventually fatally weakens trees.

If canker were allowed to become endemic, Europe, a major fresh fruit market for Florida citrus, would refuse shipments.

Then more fruit would be used for juice, and prices paid for juice would be too low. Over time, canker would spread to all the groves and also would affect the yield per acre, Meyer said.

"That is what they see in Brazil. Yields go down below the level of profitability," he said. "More growers would go out of business. We would be left with nothing."

As the canker fight continues, growers say they still have hope.

THE GULF COAST

On the Gulf Coast, where canker has taken out more than 1.2 million commercial trees, the growers have replanted rather than give up, said Ron Hamel, executive vice president of the Gulf Citrus Growers Association in LaBelle.

Meanwhile, growers continue to issue calls for help.

The public has been asked to cooperate with tree removal from affected areas, and in March, growers will

be calling on elected officials in the nation's capital.

The Indian River Citrus League's Bournique and other citrus and state officials plan to head for Washington that month to seek additional money to compensate growers for trees lost to canker.

Since the canker war began, \$95 million has been paid to growers, with \$30 million more due to be paid.

"There are 2,000 acres of commercial citrus already with no money for it," Bournique said. "The amount we need depends on what the figure is the week before we go up."