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## AGRICULTURE

# Canker blocks citrus shipments

**Fearing the spread of canker, the USDA is banning the shipment of fresh Florida citrus to other citrus-producing states.**

By Phil Long

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**INDUSTRY IN CRISIS:** General Manager of Callery Judge Grove in Loxahatchee, strolls through a field of citrus trees that had been trimmed before last hurricane season so that canker would not spread to other parts of the grove. Nat's 5 year-old Portugese Water Dog 'Gamo' walks with him.

In another blow to an industry already staggered by citrus canker, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said Tuesday that Florida can no longer ship its fresh oranges, grapefruit, tangerines and other citrus to other citrus-growing states.

The agency says the restrictions will help prevent the spread of canker to those states -- California, Texas, Arizona and Louisiana. Florida is free to ship fresh citrus to the 45 other states that don't grow their own.

## FEARS COME TRUE

This is what citrus growers feared when canker spread out of South Florida due to hurricanes in 2004 and 2005. The storms blew the bacterial disease into the heart of the orange- and grapefruit-growing regions of Central Florida.

"If a citrus-producing state has a disease, you can imagine the other citrus-producing states don't want to be exposed to any potential contamination," said USDA spokesman Jim Rogers. Florida agriculture leaders don't like the ruling, which goes into effect immediately, but it may be the best in a list of options that could have included even more restrictions.

## MAY BE CHALLENGED

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson was disappointed by the ruling and said his office is considering a legal challenge.

"We felt like it was a little unfair to cut off fruit shipments to those states that have been a staple for some of the industry, especially those in the tangerine business," he said.

The ruling was not a surprise to the industry, though it came at a time when the USDA and the industry are developing procedures that Florida growers hope will reopen the citrus-state markets.

State Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Liz Compton said Tuesday that USDA scientists have recently published a risk assessment saying that properly treated fresh citrus is not a carrier of citrus canker.

"We knew that once we found canker spreading rapidly, we'd be seeing this day and more than likely we would be seeing a quarantine," said Doug Bournique, executive director of the Indian River Citrus League, a trade organization that represents most of the state's fresh-fruit shipping industry.

Canker is a bacterial disease that is harmless to humans, but blemishes fruit and eventually causes the tree to weaken and be less productive, citrus experts say.

## **PREVIOUS COSTS**

In January, the USDA decided that eradication was no longer possible, after a 10-year battle that had cost more than \$500 million.

Since the start of the failed eradication program, the state and federal governments have destroyed at least 12.7 million citrus trees, including 860,000 in residential yards, mostly in South Florida. The total also includes 4.3 million nursery trees and 7.5 million commercial trees.

Fresh shipped citrus makes up about 10 percent of all citrus grown in the state, with the rest going to juice or other citrus products.

Through May 21, the state had shipped 28.2 million four-fifth bushel cartons of fresh citrus, the large majority going to domestic markets. About 5.1 percent of all fresh citrus shipped domestically went to Texas, Arizona, California and Louisiana, according to statistics compiled by the Citrus Administrative Committee.

## **PRECAUTIONS**

Bronson said existing guidelines -- avoiding fruit from groves within 3,800 feet of canker outbreaks, inspection of fruit 30 days before picking, and cleansing in an antibacterial solution before shipping -- are sufficient to prevent spread. He said that in the 10 years since canker was discovered in South Florida, the state has never shipped a piece of canker-infected fruit.

"We fought all along not to have fruit coming into California from a canker-infested state," said Bob Blakely, director of grower services for California Citrus Mutual, a 1,500-member grower organization representing about half the industry in that state. "We are certainly sympathetic to the Florida citrus industry, but at the same time we have to look out for California's interests."