

Posted on Mon, Feb. 06, 2006

CANKER

Citrus industry felt the squeeze

Before state and federal officials pulled the plug last month on its controversial war on citrus canker, Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry had come to fear for its very survival.

By Dan Christensen

dchristensen@MiamiHerald.com

Florida's controversial war on citrus canker ended in defeat last month with state and federal officials pointing the finger of blame at Mother Nature.

But it was the state's \$9 billion citrus industry -- not hurricanes and the canker they spread -- that led to the demise of the canker eradication program so despised by South Florida homeowners.

The program's spare-no-tree eradication approach, once demanded by Big Citrus to cleanse entire areas of infected and suspect citrus, had changed direction.

The machinery of destruction -- once pointed mostly at residential homeowners -- now was pointed squarely at the industry's heart -- the enormous commercial groves in Central Florida's citrus belt.

Suddenly, Florida's citrus industry faced an enormous, new threat to its economic infrastructure. Projected crop losses were so huge that large juice processing plants and packing houses were in jeopardy, too.

"Now that canker's in the large citrus groves and can't be controlled, they would literally be wiping out the industry to continue the program," said attorney Doug Lockwood, who represents a number of grove owners.

Minds began to change in December, after industry leaders learned the sobering reality: USDA officials told them up to 220,000 additional acres of commercial citrus -- more than a quarter of Florida's citrus crop -- must burn.

A behind-the-scenes debate about what to do accelerated. Some politically influential industry leaders squeezed to halt eradication. Others who remained untouched argued to

stay the course. And some, like Jim Griffiths, a veteran citrus farmer and consultant to Lakeland's nonprofit Citrus Grower Associates, pushed for a major course correction.

"Tremendous pressure was applied on both the Agriculture Department and the USDA to go to a Plan B," Lockwood said.

'OUT OF OUR HANDS'

"We were hearing from all sides," Deputy Florida Agriculture Commissioner Craig Meyer said. "Ultimately, the decision was taken out of our hands."

With their trees facing mass eradication, growers began to fight back as state crop eradication orders were issued.

Tyrone Kemp, a USDA official in Broward, said agriculture officials in Washington got a number of calls. He did not know who placed the calls.

PROGRAM SHUTDOWN

Florida Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson announced the shutdown of the eradication program on Jan. 11.

Longtime critics of eradication, like Coral Gables attorney Bobby Gilbert, who said he represents 500,000 homeowners seeking compensation for citrus trees lost to state chain saws, see grower hypocrisy.

"It was fine to eradicate when it didn't involve their groves," Gilbert said.

Agronomist Tim Gast, who works for U.S. Sugar Corp. subsidiary Southern Gardens Citrus Processing Inc., said a "huge sense of relief" washed over him when he heard the eradication program had been axed.

"We're expecting to find canker all over the place," Gast said. "If we had to eradicate it the way we've been doing, we would destroy everything. We weren't going to have our jobs."

HIGH ANXIETY

Today, "Plan B" is under construction and months away. Anxiety remains high. And nothing is clear except that the focus will now be on canker management, not eradication.

"It may be that eradication is just deferred for now," Meyer said. "We don't know enough about what needs to happen when you try to live with this disease, but we're going to learn."

While canker is a menace to the health of an industry that produces an annual crop worth of about \$1.2 billion, it is harmless to humans who consume infected fruit or juice, and about 90 percent of all citrus is used for juice.

But the disease blemishes fruit, causing both fruit and leaves to drop prematurely. The result is reduced yields at harvest time, and for packers, marred fruit that's unappetizing to consumers.

FIRST DETECTION

Since 1995, when canker first was detected in Miami-Dade County, about 850,000 residential trees and 10.6 million commercial trees in 24 counties have been destroyed in the name of eradication, authorities said. The federal and state government have spent more than \$500 million on the program.

Three times that amount, \$1.7 billion, would be needed to push and burn post-Hurricane Wilma canker, state officials said.

State officials contend they were on the verge of eradicating canker when hurricanes began spreading it around. And the industry stuck with the program despite the loss of 80,000 commercial acres after the disastrous 2004 hurricane season.

DESPISED PROGRAM

Florida's eradication program, which required the destruction of all citrus within 1,900 feet of an infected tree, an area of about 260 acres, was despised by urban homeowners because it allowed the state to cut down their healthy trees -- even when canker was nowhere in sight. They called it junk science.

But the industry, the USDA and state agriculture officials believed in the science. They also had the law on their side after the Florida Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the canker eradication law in February 2004.

With all that going for it, the industry was united in support of the 1,900-foot rule, McKenna said.

But in December, after Washington's USDA experts told industry leaders that new computer models showed that Wilma had so scattered canker spores that eradication was no longer feasible, growers learned how bad the situation had become.

The 1,900-foot rule would not only decimate groves, it would disrupt the supply of fruit to processing plants and packing houses where thousands worked.

COMPENSATION

Growers were still reeling from that news when the government announced Uncle Sam would no longer bankroll eradication or compensate growers who lost crop.

Until then, Meyer said, compensation was paid at up to \$9,000 an acre -- an amount growers long maintained was not sufficient to cover their losses.

"They basically told us, 'We can't commit that we have the dollars to do that,' " McKenna said.

Before the 2004 hurricane season, canker was confined primarily to Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, state officials said. Growers hoped to contain it there and complained those efforts were frustrated by court battles launched by residents and local governments.

FEELING PAIN

Lately, growers in Central Florida have felt the most pain.

Week after week, the names of new orange, tangerine and grapefruit groves are added to the state's list of new commercial canker finds. Fifty-one groves were found to be infected between Nov. 13 and Jan. 7.

Still, the goal of ridding Florida of canker may not be stone cold dead.

It may just be in a coma.