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Florida and California citrus growers face off

Citrus farmers have everything on the line as the USDA considers changing shipping rules to allow clean fruit from an infected grove.

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VERO BEACH --

On the eve of citrus season, proposed changes in federal fresh fruit shipping rules have touched off a major battle between Florida growers and their counterparts in California and other citrus-producing states.

Heavy financial implications could await the loser.

At the heart of the fight is citrus canker, the tree disease that led the state and federal government to destroy 865,000 residential citrus trees, most of them in South Florida, in a failed attempt to eradicate the disease. The program also felled 11.3 million commercial and 4.3 million nursery citrus trees.

This time, the battleground is in commercial groves and the issue isn't eradication.

The proposed rule change includes dropping a requirement to conduct pre-harvest grove inspections. Such inspections have previously disqualified fruit from fresh shipment in cases where inspectors found even a small outbreak of canker anywhere in the grove to be picked.

The new rule would instead focus on inspecting and disinfecting fruit at the packinghouse.

The USDA has concluded that fruit that has been inspected at the packinghouse, treated and found free of symptoms of canker, then properly packaged, presents negligible risk of spreading canker.

Still, many California growers want to institute the new rule only on a pilot basis, and restrict sales of Florida fresh fruit to northern states east of the Mississippi River.

Florida growers staunchly oppose any such restriction.

Canker is harmless to humans, but blemishes fresh fruit and causes trees to produce less fruit, citrus officials say.

Earlier this year inspectors found a small outbreak of the dreaded citrus canker disease in one of Dan Richey's groves near Vero Beach.

Under USDA rules designed to prevent the disease's spread to other citrus-producing states or countries, none of Richey's 40 acres of grapefruit could be shipped fresh to supermarkets or other customers in the U.S. or Europe.

The fruit had to go to the cannery, or to Japan. So instead of making \$8 or \$9 a box for fruit he might have shipped fresh to Boston or Chicago, Richey said he got \$1 a box.

Had the proposed policy change been in effect this year, Richey could have harvested fruit from other trees in his affected grove as long as none of the fruit had signs of the disease.

Richey believes the new protocol would provide adequate protection for California and other citrus-producing states like Texas, Louisiana and Arizona.

Richey's dilemma has been repeated in varying degrees many times across the heart of Florida's fresh fruit industry. Statewide, in the 12 months ending June 30, state inspectors turned down nearly 20,000 acres of fruit that growers had prepared for the fresh fruit market, citing the presence of canker in groves.

That doesn't include figures on groves that growers didn't seek an inspection for, knowing they had an infected tree. The state could be losing \$80 million because of the current rule, according to an estimate by Richard Kinney, executive director of Florida Citrus Packers, a non-profit cooperative.

"My worst nightmare is that canker would become established here in California," said John Grether, 56, who owns or manages 2,000 acres of citrus near Somis, north of Los Angeles.

"It's a devastating disease, a tough thing," Grether told The Miami Herald. He sympathizes with Florida growers.

"We understand their pain, but we don't want to share it," Grether said.

Several concerned about the rule have urged more scientific study before any change.

Some California growers are also concerned about the potential spread of citrus greening, another tree disease present in Florida. But greening is not part of the USDA's proposed shipping rule change.

Confining Florida sales to northern states east of the Mississippi would be, "an enormous threat to the economic viability of the industry and us personally," said Richey, an industry leader.

People from other citrus producing states "need to look at the science and evaluate it in a way that is not just parochial," he said.

Growers protect their trees against canker with copper-based sprays, among other methods, and inspect them for evidence of the disease before picking.

That's because showing up at a packing house with a truckload containing even a few pieces of diseased fruit would cause the whole truckload to be rejected and be very costly to the grower, Richey said. Should diseased fruit get into the packing house, the production line would have to be shut down, equipment cleaned and people idled, a very expensive event.

Growers who ship fresh fruit to Europe will still have to undergo pre-harvest grove inspections, Richey said, because of European import rules.

Another California concern is that changing the inspection standards could encourage foreign competitors with similar pest disease problems to try to get their fruit approved for U.S. import.

"The objective of a rule addressing Florida's situation should be to prevent disease-free areas from being infected; it should not be designed with the primary objective to allow shipments of fresh fruit from diseased areas," wrote the authors of a report by California Citrus Mutual, Sunkist Growers and the U.S. Citrus Science Council.

USDA officials will not respond to comments about the proposed plan. A final decision is due soon.



MARICE COHN BAND/MIAMI HERALD FILE, 2002

This fruit is infected with citrus canker. One infected tree can spoil a whole grove.