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## Big-city cynics put squeeze on citrus farmers

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There was a time when South Florida embraced the conspiracy theory behind canker eradication.

Any public discussion of the state program to chop down our citrus trees was dominated by the notion that this was just some nefarious plot hatched by the citrus industry and their minions in state government to eliminate competition from backyard trees.

The economics supporting the conspiracy were a little bizarre -- a \$9 billion business beset with competition from groves in Brazil and Mexico decides to marshal the dark forces against Uncle Frank's gnarly old grapefruit tree. No matter. The conspiracy theory was repeated in so many public meetings and letters-to-the-editor that it became an accepted fact. Paranoia spread as fast as canker through South Florida.

### POLITICAL HAY

The Broward County commissioners and other elected leaders sensed political opportunity in the idea that the canker threat was an exaggeration, hardly worthy of drastic measures. The commissioners, apparently steeped in plant pathology, were incensed by the state's plan to remove other citrus trees, even healthy trees, within a 1,900-foot radius of an infected tree to staunch the spread of canker bacteria.

The county's lawyers were sent to court to stop the eradication program. State Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson argued, "Common sense would tell the average person the disease is spreading while we're doing all these court maneuvers."

With Shakespearean flourish, then-County Commissioner Lori Parrish dismissed his warning as "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

And Broward's lawyers managed to delay, for years, what everyone knew was inevitable. Finally, last February, the Florida Supreme Court smacked them down.

So the chain saws are revving up again. But somehow the old conspiracy theory seems to have lost its cachet. Perhaps that's because the chain saws are cutting thousands of trees from Central Florida's commercial groves.

### SPREADING NORTH

While the eradication program was stymied in Broward Circuit Court these last four years, the citrus canker infestation spread north. The idiot's tale seem markedly less idiotic last week as word came that 45,000 trees would be removed from a single grove in St. Lucie County. The infestations had spread from Palm Beach County into Martin, St. Lucie, Brevard, Orange, Indian River counties -- threatening the very heart of the Florida commercial citrus groves.

By November, the state had removed 2,622,892 commercial citrus trees, compared to 668,934 from residential lots. The conspiracy theorists have gone quiet. "We don't hear much of that

rhetoric any more," said Mark Fagan, spokesman for the Florida Ag Commission.

Consider what South Florida got from all those delays. "No one gained anything," Fagan said.

Make that less than nothing. In 2000, the state plan called for removal of 80,000 trees in South Florida. Five years of unabated citrus canker later, the state now figures it must remove 200,000 backyard citrus trees in South Florida.

The squabble has not endeared us to the growers in St. Lucie and Indian River counties, already stressed by huge crop losses after last summer's hurricanes. And now canker -- our canker to their way of thinking -- threatens their groves.

"We could have stopped the canker 10 years ago in Miami-Dade County," a bitter, frightened St. Lucie grower told me this week. He railed that South Florida's mindless intransigence may well ruin life along the Indian River, killing the citrus industry, eliminating jobs and forcing financially strapped growers to sell out to developers. These vast groves, he said, will become sprawling subdivisions. "People down there in South Florida don't respect agriculture," the grower said. "They forget where their food comes from."