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## AGRICULTURE

# Growers to get canker funds

**Commercial growers slammed by citrus canker are getting \$200 million in help from the USDA.**

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About 230 Florida commercial citrus growers who have lost trees to the citrus canker eradication program will be eligible for \$200 million in federal compensation, industry and U.S. Department of Agriculture leaders said Thursday.

"Many Florida commercial growers have seen their livelihoods destroyed by citrus canker," Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said in a written statement. "This funding will help them recover those losses and further our eradication activities, which are critical to preserving Florida's \$9.1 billion citrus industry and preventing the spread of the disease."

Because citrus canker is still spreading, officials estimate claims for another \$250 million remain. Earlier this week the USDA gave the state just under \$54 million for its program to survey, identify and destroy diseased and exposed trees.

The \$6,000 to \$9,000-an-acre payment, which will go to commercial growers only, won't cover all their losses, but growers say it's welcome relief.

Economics vary from grower to grower, said Doug Bournique, executive director of the Indian River Citrus League, but the \$200 million will cover about two-thirds of what it takes to get trees back into production, a seven- to eight-year process. That also includes some lost profit.

"This really bridges the gap for us to have options, to have the opportunity to get back in the business," said Kevin Bynum of Premier Citrus, a company that has lost 3,400 of its 15,000 acres of citrus to canker on the Treasure Coast. Of that 3,400, about half will likely be covered in the \$200-million grant, Bynum said.

"Without this commitment, you start to look for alternatives," said Dan Richey, a Treasure Coast grower.

Those alternatives could range from selling the land for development to growing something less suitable. Canker has hit 1,000 of the 4,000 acres Richey and his partners own. Richey is also an industry representative and a co-chair of the state's canker advisory task force.

"This relief couldn't come at a better time," U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida said in a written statement. "Florida's agricultural economy is suffering huge economic losses because of citrus canker, and it gets worse every time a hurricane blows through."

Canker, which is harmless to humans, blemishes fruit, weakens trees and eventually reduces production, citrus officials say. The only way to stop its spread is to cut down the diseased tree and every citrus tree within 1,900 feet, state officials say.

Since the latest outbreak began in Miami-Dade in 1995 and has since spread to 23 other counties, the state has cut 833,075 residential trees and 5.2 million commercial trees. There are 5.6 million more commercial trees that have been infected with or exposed to canker and are in the process of being cut or are scheduled for destruction, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.