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CITRUS

Officials scramble to erase canker

Florida's citrus industry may be saved from the destruction of citrus canker as long as no more hurricanes hit, but a bigger danger may be looming.

BY Susan Salisbury
Palm Beach Post

FORT PIERCE - As long as there are no more hurricanes, Florida's citrus industry can be saved from destruction by canker, officials told growers Wednesday.

But the recent discovery in Miami-Dade County of an even deadlier plague -- citrus greening, also known as yellow dragon disease -- has officials scrambling to find a plan to combat it.

"It's more insidious, harder to detect and harder to diagnose," said Richard Gaskalla, chief of the state Agriculture Department's Division of Plant Industry, who spoke Wednesday at the 75th annual meeting of the Indian River Citrus League in Fort Pierce.

Gaskalla said he expects a group of scientists, state and federal officials that have been formed to address the citrus greening problem to have a combat plan in place by Friday. Options include grove removal, using wasps to devour the insects that spread the disease, and putting in ornamental plants around the groves to lure the bugs and then kill them.

Scientists could also develop tree stock that is resistant to the Asian citrus psyllid, the insect that carries and spreads the bacterium.

Crippling plant diseases are nothing new to growers, who have been battling the latest outbreak of citrus canker for the last 10 years. Since August 2004, when the first of last season's four hurricanes struck, more than 6.9 million commercial grove trees have been removed or are scheduled to be removed.

Gaskalla told the growers that if no hurricanes -- which spread the canker bacterium -- hit Florida during the next four to six weeks, eradication officials should be able to be "back on track" in handling the disease. When the state is finished removing the infected and exposed trees, only 8 percent of the state's commercial citrus groves will have been affected, he said.