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AGRICULTURE

Canker uproots trees -- and growers' lives

Many growers are wondering if they will get reimbursed by the USDA for fruit trees they are losing to the citrus canker eradication program.

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FORT PIERCE - A honeybell tree whose sweet fruit has graced tables for 65 years lay sprawled on its side in the hot afternoon sun. Its roots, ripped from the dark soil by a bulldozer's steel blade, dangled lifeless, waiting for the torch.

All around, trees wait to be burned -- victims of a nearby discovery of citrus canker, a malady that threatens Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry.

Brown, curled leaves crumbled in Pete Spyke's fingers as he stood at the honeybell, agonizing over its fate and pondering his own.

Canker, Spyke said, "took all our hopes and dreams, placed them in a pile and lit a match."

"That tree can't be replaced for any amount of money," said Spyke, a third-generation grower and former extension agent. "The fruit on that tree never saw a grocery store shelf. It was sold to the highest quality gift fruit trade."

Spyke's grandfather, Harry L. Spyke, began buying fruit from the grove and shipping it out of his business in Broward County nearly 55 years ago.

Pete Spyke, who is both scared and optimistic about the future, bought the grove for himself in 1983. He has been using it to supply his own business and the one still run in Broward by his mother and sister. Now he must buy fruit from other area groves not affected by the disease.

The honeybells on the oldest trees had twice the sugar and acid content of younger trees.

'It was a `wow' fruit,' he smiled. 'You take a bite of it and say, 'Wow, this is good.' "

Today, Spyke's honeybell is one of 4 million trees that have had to be pushed and burned in the state's effort to eradicate canker. That's about 5 percent of all commercial trees in the state.

Canker is harmless to humans but blemishes fruit and weakens the tree. The only way to get rid of it is to destroy every infected tree; the law also requires that every citrus tree within 1,900 feet of an infected tree be destroyed.

On the Treasure Coast, where Spyke has his grove, 15 to 20 percent of the work force is employed in citrus or citrus-related jobs and the industry generates a little less than \$2 billion in direct and related economic activity, leaders estimate.

"This old grove was bedded by a mule," Spyke said. Bedding, the mounding of soil creating a high place for the tree and a ditch for irrigation between rows of trees, was an arduous, labor-intensive task in the early days.

Now it is done by machines.

Tangeloes, oranges, tangerines, grapefruit, temples, he said, rattling off the varieties on the 100 acres. "Everything will be pushed by the middle of September," Spyke said.

The future?

FEAR FOR THE FUTURE

"A lot of fear. We don't know what we're going to do," Spyke said.

"I don't want to see it go to development," Spyke said. "There's not a better piece of land for citrus."

Spyke is one of 330 growers awaiting \$300 to \$400 million in compensation from the USDA.

The repayment usually runs between about \$6,000 and \$9,000 an acre depending on the variety of fruit.

He needs the money to help keep his business going during the years before he replants and the trees reach maturity.

So far, the USDA has paid out more than \$130 million in compensation to growers.

But little has been paid for new claims dating back almost a year. That is because the new claims came after the last appropriation cycle, said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League, a trade organization.

League members and others will be in Washington next month lobbying for the appropriation.

The USDA is responsible for keeping out plant diseases at all of the nation's ports, Bournique said.

Canker likely came in through the Miami Airport just over a decade ago, he said.

COMPENSATION CLAIMS

"We feel they should compensate growers who burn their groves willingly to help defeat that disease," Bournique said. So far the federal government has agreed -- though because the money has not yet been appropriated, it may be difficult to get all the claims paid in one year. Citrus industry leaders will be in Washington next month lobbying to get the money to growers.

U.S. Rep Adam Putnam, a Republican from west Central Florida and a member of the agricultural committee, said \$300 million is a lot of money and many other needs will be competing for federal money.

The USDA money would help Spyke and others pay outstanding bills and prepare to replant, but it is not enough to compensate for losses over the next seven to nine years, he said.

Recovery takes so long because the canker eradication program requires that no citrus be grown on the land for two years after it has been cleared of citrus. After that, it takes an average of seven years for a citrus tree to grow enough to yield a profit.

Spyke has been hurt on two fronts.

He also runs a grove care-taking service. Unluckier than most, he has lost 75 percent of that business because canker hit some of his customers.

Spyke is struggling to keep his business alive and keep jobs for about 80 workers.

Can he survive in the citrus business?

He plans to try.

"It's going to take some creative thinking," Spyke said. The industry may "have to go through dramatic change, but we are going to do our best to stay in the game."