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USDA DETERMINES CITRUS CANKER ERADICATION NOT FEASIBLE

TALLAHASSEE—Florida Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services Charles H. Bronson has received word from top United States Department of Agriculture officials that they no longer believe that it is possible to eradicate citrus canker. USDA's position was formally communicated in a letter from Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner. Officials said based on USDA's scientific analysis of the potential spread of the disease from the unprecedented 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, a new management plan must be devised.

The USDA officials say the program needs to undertake a new approach that focuses on maintaining bacteria levels low enough to sustain citrus production and protect citrus groves that have not been infested with canker. In the meantime, USDA states that they will no longer fund tree removal that is done with eradication as the goal. The federal agency, in conjunction with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, intends to develop a response plan with scientific, industry and public input that will limit further tree removal and implement management practices that will accomplish the goals of controlling and suppressing canker infestations.

“I am committed to working with our federal partner, the scientific community and growers on steps to ensure the continued sustainability of this industry, so critical to the economic well being of our state as well as protecting the thousands of residential trees that have not yet been impacted by citrus canker. I will make all resources available to determine where we go to secure the future of the citrus industry.”

The change comes after a review of scientific research that indicates Hurricane Wilma may have spread the disease to the point where an estimated 168,000 to 220,000 acres of commercial citrus could be infected and exposed to canker. This is in addition to the more than 80,000 acres of commercial citrus that was affected by the 2004 hurricanes. The USDA also indicates that growers have said they cannot survive the loss of more than 25% of the state's citrus acreage and that federal costs to implement the 1900 foot tree removal would cost significantly more than the annual \$36 million dollar federal appropriation as well as hundreds of millions more in compensation payments to growers. The USDA has provided a significant portion of the funding for the canker eradication program and all of the grower compensation since its inception in 1995.

“Unfortunately, everything the scientists predicted has come true,” Bronson said. “The legal delays and unprecedented hurricanes enabled the bacteria to leap frog significantly beyond the 1900 foot cutting zone that science showed was necessary to prevent spread under normal weather conditions.”

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In addition, Bronson pledged to continue his efforts to push the Legislature and USDA to provide compensation for homeowners and growers who have already had trees removed. He will be requesting additional funding for homeowners during the 2006 legislative session and will be working with USDA to secure money for growers who are currently on a waiting list for federal compensation dollars.

As a result of the USDA decision, the Florida Legislature will have to revisit the laws that guide the canker eradication program, notably the requirement that the Department remove infected citrus trees and those exposed because they are located within 1900 feet.