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Abandoned Groves a Citrus Greening Threat

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THE LEDGER

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LAKE WALES | Perhaps the most important factor in controlling the spread of citrus greening, a fatal bacterial disease, lies in keeping down populations of the citrus psyllid, the bacteria's insect host most responsible for greening's rapid spread.

That task became significantly harder when citrus people learned the state has 129,869 acres of abandoned groves, a prime breeding ground for the psyllid.

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"It basically confirmed our real fear," said Mike Sparks, chief executive at Florida Citrus Mutual in Lakeland, the state's largest grower representative. "If it were a smaller number, maybe it would not be a statewide issue. With almost 130,000 abandoned acres, it's a statewide issue."

Battling greening is the top priority for the Florida citrus industry because, unlike most other pests and diseases it has battled, greening kills trees instead of lowering production. That's why Sparks and others fear the large amount of abandoned groves, which means the owners aren't using pesticides and other measures to control psyllids, giving them a breeding ground and a chance to move to active commercial groves nearby.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted the abandoned grove survey as part of its 2008 biennial census of citrus acreage and trees, released Friday afternoon at Florida's Natural Grove House in Lake Wales.

The survey used digital aerial photography of the state's citrus belt, mostly south of Interstate 4, and used computer software that picked out signs of abandonment, such as high weed growth, lack of tree hedging and unharvested fruit, said Candi Erick, administrator for citrus statistics at the USDA's office in Orlando. USDA officials followed up on some properties with on-site visits or contacting owners.

St. Lucie leads the state with 25,285 abandoned acres, not surprising given the collapse of farm prices for grapefruit used for juice in the past two seasons, the survey report shows. Indian River is second with 13,781 abandoned acres. Both counties are part of the world's largest grapefruit-growing region. Polk County was not far behind with 11,659 abandoned acres, ranked fourth behind Hendry County with 12,296 acres. Okeechobee and Lake counties, with 11,114 and 10,044 acres, respectively, are the only others exceeding 10,000 acres.

Citrus Mutual has formed a committee to deal with the issue of abandoned groves, said Sparks and Frank Becker, Mutual's president and an executive with Peace River
Citrus Products Inc., a juice processor.

"I think the abandoned grove number is the more important story" (than the census), Becker said. "We're going to push forward with getting rid of these feral groves."

Strategies under consideration include a new law making it easier to condemn abandoned groves, forcing tree removal, and offering property owners financial incentives to remove the trees, Sparks and Becker said.

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