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Florida citrus growers continue to recover from the difficulties of last season — three hurricanes that swept across the citrus belt causing widespread destruction and the aftermath of spreading canker. Then, the news of the discovery in the Homestead area in September of the bacterial disease huanglongbing — more commonly referred to as citrus greening — has come as a one-two-three punch for growers. U.S. Department of Agriculture pathologist Tim Gottwald calls the disease, “the most devastating for citrus,” and said, “Canker is easy, but look out for greening.”

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The bacterial disease attacks the vascular system of plants and once infected, there is no cure. In other areas of the world where citrus greening is endemic, citrus trees decline and die within a few years.

Part of the problem, according to Gottwald, is that greening is extremely difficult to find because the variation in the length of time from infection to the expression of symptoms can range from two to three months or as long as two to three years. Additionally, the bacteria cannot be cultured in a lab, making scientific research into the disease very difficult. The disease is transmitted from one plant to another by insect vectors — citrus psyllids — first discovered in Florida in 1998.

Immediately following the confirmation of greening, USDA's Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory

Programs Bill Hawks assured growers that “the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service is committed

to working closely with the state of Florida to assess the situation.” A joint scientific panel was convened by APHIS and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to obtain expert advice on the most effective surveillance and control strategies. Hopefully, the disease has been discovered early enough to stop it before it becomes widespread.

The canker and legal front

On the canker front, the news may be improving. Though there have been more confirmations of the disease, officials with the USDA and FDACS Division of Plant Industry remain confident that total eradication of canker can still be accomplished.

On Sept. 14, the Florida House Agriculture Committee, chaired by Rep. Ralph Poppell, got a thorough update on the status of the canker eradication program. Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Charles Bronson and Deputy Commissioner Craig Meyer answered questions from the committee on the likelihood of whether canker can still be eradicated. In short, they responded that given the necessary resources, the answer is still “yes.”

Also speaking on behalf of the Citrus Canker Eradication Program were Florida Citrus Mutual President Marty McKenna of Sebring and Mutual Board Member Kevin Bynum of Vero Beach.

With regard to funding, there is more good news. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns has reaffirmed his continuing support to work closely with the industry and with Congress to obtain resources for eradication activities.

And, on the legal front there was good news for the Florida Department of Citrus. The Florida Supreme Court, with regard to the appeal of the box tax case, has squashed the decision of the 2nd District Court of Appeal which found the DOC's generic advertising to be unconstitutional, and remanded the case back to the 2nd for reconsideration. This, in view of the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Johanns v. Livestock Marketing* in which the Court held that the advertising in that case was the government's own speech and therefore not subject to First Amendment scrutiny.

The Florida Supreme Court stipulated, if necessary, the 2nd DCA could request records to be established in order to determine whether the advertising in question involves government speech under *Johanns*. This case could, after three years of litigation, finally be coming to an end.

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