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Charley's 140 mph winds blow canker across state

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Like a giant, 140-mph sneeze, Hurricane Charley infected thousands of citrus trees with canker.

Charlotte County's first outbreak of the bacterial infection -- which travels on wind-driven rain and reveals itself in brown, corky lesions on fruit, leaves and stems -- is also one of the largest ever witnessed.

Off Farabee Road, in the northeast corner of the county, state agriculture officials found more than 11,000 trees in one grove bearing the lesions. They have ordered those trees, and every other tree within a 1,900-foot radius, destroyed. When contractors are done, they will have killed 110,500 trees and cleared 850 acres.

Charlotte County has about 20,000 acres in citrus production.

The winds blew canker into at least five other counties -- Osceola, Highlands, Lee, Collier and Orange -- as well.

Although agriculture officials couldn't say for sure that this is the state's largest canker outbreak, Denise Feiber, a spokeswoman for the Florida Department

of Agriculture and Consumer Services, said the number of lesion-bearing trees found in Charlotte is certainly near the top.

Michael Barnes, a citrus canker eradication program director for the department, went a step further.

Barnes said he could not remember more than 3,500 canker-positive trees ever being found in a grove.

"This is unprecedented," he said.

State agricultural officials say they are doing everything possible to contain the disease. But they admit that they may not know until the next wet season how far it traveled on the winds of Charley -- or Frances, or Ivan or Jeanne.

"All of the science that we have on citrus canker is based on normal weather patterns," Barnes said.

Because it was blown so far, canker could have gone just about anywhere.

"Our concern is that all bets are off because of the hurricane," said Barnes, who oversees five counties, including Charlotte.

The uncertainty worries growers, many of whom are already reeling from damage that the storms inflicted on this season's crops.

Under the state's canker eradication program, every tree within 1,900 feet of a canker-positive tree is taken down and burned.

"I think everybody's on high alert about this and just more antsy about how much more will show up and where will that be," said Ron Hamel, executive vice president of Gulf Citrus Growers Association.

State officials have little doubt that hurricanes are responsible for this rapid spread of canker.

Barnes said Charley's ferocious winds effectively "sandblasted" the trees, leaving injuries in the fruit, leaves and branches that the wind-borne bacteria could easily exploit.

Scientists can gauge the time of infection by the lesions' growth. Many of the trees with lesions were young, making it easier for investigators to connect the outbreak with the storms.

"The disease was obviously spread by hurricanes," Barnes said.

But determining where the canker originated is another issue. Barnes said a tree that had canker for an estimated nine months may have been responsible for the large outbreak near Farabee Road.

Inspectors also found a handful of diseased trees at three locations near Burnt Store Road outside Punta Gorda. That bacteria may have been blown from Pine Island in Lee County, said Feiber. Inspectors discovered a tree there that had been infected for five to seven years, but had gone undetected.

Canker-infected citrus is harmless to people. But it causes fruit to fall off trees before it ripens and makes trees shed their leaves.

"It reduces dramatically the productivity of the trees," said Feiber.

The state's \$9 billion-a-year citrus industry backs the citrus eradication program. Since an outbreak of the disease in 1995, the state has destroyed more than 2.4 million trees in commercial groves and 650,000 trees in residential areas.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture compensates citrus growers for lost income and for the cost of replanting. Although the payouts vary, depending on fruit variety and other factors, Barnes said it's an average of \$9,400 per acre.

"If you go back into citrus, it's a break-even deal," he said.

It can take about seven years for growers to get a grove back into production, after trees have been cleared and burned.

Hamel said it's hard to forecast the impact of this canker outbreak on the industry. Generally, larger growers have a better chance of rebounding, he said.

While the industry champions aggressive treatment, homeowners unwilling to part with their home-grown oranges and grapefruit have opposed the program.

Some Florida homeowners sued the state to stop the removal of uninfected trees and won temporary restraining orders. The state eventually prevailed.

Although most of the canker Charley blew in landed far from residential areas, the infected trees near Burnt Store Road were close to some neighborhoods.

About 800 citrus trees there will have to be removed, even if they don't have lesions, Barnes said.

Inspectors have yet to find infected trees in Port Charlotte or Punta Gorda.

The state will send property owners warrants notifying them that their trees must go. Owners have 10 days to appeal before the department removes their trees. They can also sign waivers allowing immediate removal.

The state gives homeowners a \$100 voucher redeemable at Wal-Mart Garden Centers for the first tree removed. They get \$55 cash for each additional tree.

Homeowners, however, can't plant new citrus trees until quarantines -- at least two years long -- are lifted.

The state agriculture department plans to hold public meetings so residents can learn more about canker eradication.

Officials hope that county residents who are affected will be as understanding as Bill Betz.

After Hurricane Charley toppled a tall grapefruit tree in his yard, Betz hired contractors to turn it upright and brace it against future weather.

"I was just so happy it had survived and looked like it was going to keep going," said the 67-year-old stock broker.

But in October Betz learned that an orange tree had canker and that all three of his citrus trees were doomed.

Betz said he hadn't seen the bill from the contractors who saved the tree, but he was sure it would be a lot more than the state's compensation.

Although he understands the need to stop the disease from spreading, he wasn't happy about not being able to plant citrus again for at least two more years.

"At my age, by the time I can replant I'm not sure I'll be able to go out there and pick it," he said.