

Cartels to gain from Florida citrus canker

by Marcia Merry

On Aug. 24, the presence of citrus canker was discovered in central Florida, in an old, established supplier of young citrus stock to groves and other nurseries throughout the Florida citrus belt, Ward's Nursery. The virulent disease, very harmful to citrus plants, though harmless to humans, has been traced back to at least last January, and plant pathologists are searching for exactly when and where it was introduced. It was necessarily carried into the state on leaf, treestock, or fruit by human agent, since the disease was eradicated in Florida by 1927. The contamination was either inadvertent, perhaps through a gypsy "budder" who works in the groves, or even possibly deliberate, as some have rumored when the question of who benefits is considered.

Any resulting shortfall in orange juice concentrate supplies for the United States will be met from Brazil. Food cartel operations there, notably Cargill, Inc., have been positioning themselves to take advantage of just such a contingency as the Florida citrus canker outbreak.

On Sept. 12, Secretary of Agriculture John Block declared a state of emergency in Florida, and authorized special funds for a canker eradication program. Since then, specialists have been brought in from California and other citrus states to help speed the process. Containment and eradication measures have also been taken by the Florida growers and the state. At this time, harvesting of citrus is proceeding in those groves of the state where inspectors have checked and found no canker. The inspection, regulatory, and eradication program will take as much as a year, however. So far, the disease has appeared in only six out of about 100 citrus nurseries. Those six have been burned—the only known remedy for eradicating the infestation. As of late September, there have been no reported infestations of the groves themselves.

Florida produces about 70% of the U.S. orange crop. The possible damage to the harvest has sent orange juice prices up sharply on the New York Cotton Exchange. The spot frozen orange juice concentrate price rose from \$1.7310 a pound Sept. 10, to \$1.8170 Sept. 12.

The Brazilian orange crop has been "bought forward" up through 1986. Brazilian groves are concentrated in the state of São Paulo. The United States and Brazil together account for 63% of the world's oranges. The states of Florida and São Paulo alone account for 47% of annual world output. In the

last three years, during which Florida has been struck by killer frosts, São Paulo, Brazil has outproduced Florida in total tonnage of oranges harvested. Florida has produced 172,400 million metric tons (1981), 125,800 (1982), and 142,200 (1983). São Paulo produced 175,400 (1981), 184,410 (1982), and 181,000 (1983.)

Brazil's growers have placed themselves in position to take special advantage of any problems encountered by Florida growers. The Brazilian orange groves represent a mix of independent growers, corporate-cartel holdings, and old European oligarchy holdings—the latter two barely distinct. Over the last several years, through certain channels in the government associated with policies of the International Monetary Fund—the old European oligarchy—some of the cartel and oligarchy holdings received government money to develop and expand citrus groves on a crash basis.

The Brazilian processing and international export trade is a very "closed" circle, dominated by cartel interests. Cargill (Cargill Ind. LTDA) is among the top four juice concentrate manufacturers in Brazil. Cargill and the Italian black aristocracy's notorious Matarazzo family, which controls Frutesp S.A.-Agro. Ind., own 25% of the juice concentrate processing capacity.

Recently, Cargill put into operation the world's first stainless steel tank ship for transporting frozen concentrated orange juice in bulk. The M/V Bebedouro, registered in Singapore, carries 1.3 million gallons out of Santos, Brazil.

There have been no precise estimates of the damage to the Florida industry, but to restore it to its recent production level will take at least 10 years because the canker follows three years of killer frosts. On Dec. 25 and 26, when the temperature in much of the state dropped to 20°F, an estimated 10 million trees were killed or damaged. This represents about 159,000 acres of mature trees. The growers were engaged in a crash program to replace this loss when news came of the canker infestation. Now, the total 761,000 acres of citrus will have to be inspected, which growers hope will be done before any significant dislocation to harvest takes place.

The Florida nurserymen have no insurance against canker, and face personal financial disaster. And, although the national citrus supply depends on a vigorous Florida citrus industry, the federal government has not indicated any remedial action. The USDA will only say there are "discussions" under way. The USDA and the State Department are well known to frequently act as tools of the food-cartel companies and other favored importers of fruit into the United States—United Brands, for example. Such channels bring in citrus from Mexico, where the citrus canker is present, though the fruit is chlorinated for export. However, when the canker was discovered in Florida, the USDA at first refused to permit even chlorinated fruit out of the state to other non-citrus states. Intense pressure was required to force a more reasonable approach.

Canker must have come from outside

Citrus canker (Xanthomonas citri) is a bacterial disease that causes extensive damage to the branches, leaves, and fruit of plants in the Rue family, which includes all citrus fruits. The last known infestation in the United States was eradicated in Texas in 1947. Here, Dr. Ernest P. Du Charme, a plant pathologist with 35-years research experience, including work in Argentina and Japan, is interviewed by Agriculture Editor Marcia Merry on the canker's appearance in Florida.

EIR: Is there a parasite or virus that could be developed to attack the citrus canker?

Du Charme: These possibilities exist but where they have been attempted they are not practical. The phages will work in petrie dishes and surface contamination under experimental conditions, but in nature, when you are trying to reach the bacteria beneath the skin of the fruit and in the peel, or under the natural respiration openings of the tree and plant, you don't reach them.

EIR: What about chemicals—copper compounds?

Du Charme: Copper compounds are effective in destroying the bacterium—copper sulphate, or a copper oxichloride. And the spraying rate we recommend is three fourths of a pound of metallic copper in 100 gallons of water. The copper itself, when the molecules are very finely ground to micron size, becomes an effective prophylactic and decontaminant. However, if there is an infection underneath the skin tissues of the plant, this remedy does not reach it.

EIR: What percentage of the Florida citrus acreage has been sprayed?

Du Charme: I expect that within the next two or three weeks, and this is only an opinion, at least half will be sprayed with copper as a prophylactic spray.

EIR: Can plants build up resistance?

Du Charme: No, plants do not have an immune system like animals. So this won't work. About the only thing that can be done with plants, is that you can get them accustomed to living in a very hostile environment with certain chemicals, but not with organisms or parasites.

EIR: Can we breed new stock resistant to pests?

Du Charme: Yes, you can. The only problem is that, one, citrus is a perennial crop and will keep for many years; two, the organisms mutate rapidly. There are millions and millions of bacteria on the leaf, for example, and mutation is encountered in, say, one in ten million bacteria. Now consider what happens with annual plants. We have learned how to tailor-make different varieties of wheat to withstand a given race of rust. But if you keep these varieties of wheat more than several years, they are susceptible because another race turns up. So in citrus, where you hope to keep the plant a hundred years, or fifty years, it is not practical.

EIR: Some observers, like Senator Hawkins, say the Florida canker is like the Mexican variety?

Du Charme: First of all, it isn't anything like the form they've got in Mexico. It is caused by the same bacterium, but a different strain than the Mexican. We have not had a chance yet to identify the Florida strain.

EIR: If you had the resources, could you roll the canker back throughout the world?

Du Charme: No, we can't eradicate it yet. We have to do this by destroying infected plants, including where the bacterium is carried in a latent form. In places like Japan, I don't know if you would ever get rid of it because it is all over the country. . . . Brazil has been working on an eradication program since 1957 in São Paulo, an attempt to confine it to some varieties of limes and lemons. In Argentina they began an eradication program in 1977, but they gave up. . . . Israel doesn't have it. The Mediterranean area is also free of it. They once had canker in South Africa but destroyed it.

EIR: How did the canker start in Florida?

Du Charme: We generally feel that wherever you have a new occurrence, it has to be brought in somehow. The most probable way is citrus plant parts. It could come in from any place they have canker. And it can be carried on the fruit. No matter how it got in, it was illegal entry. We do not permit the importation of any kind of citrus vegetative plant part—no budwood, no root, nothing. Plant pathologists are trying to find out how the material came into Florida.

EIR: We think there are grounds to suspect economic sabotage on behalf of those wanting strategic food and commodity scarcity in the West. What do you think?

Du Charme: Plantwise, this is possible. The reason I say that, is that in World War II the states of the United States were divided up into regions and there were plant pathologists assigned to that region and all they did was to patrol agricultural fields looking for diseases that were not typical of those areas. The United States is willing, and prepared in the face of prospects of biological warfare in agriculture.