

Citrus growers vote to support CAFTA

By Susan Salisbury
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RIVIERA BEACH — Florida's largest citrus grower organization voted Wednesday to support the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement, which would expand free trade with five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic.

The move, which came during a Florida Citrus Mutual board meeting during an industry conference on Singer Island, outraged Florida sugar producers, who are fighting to defeat CAFTA.

Andy LaVigne, chief executive officer of the citrus growers' group, said Florida Citrus Mutual acted at the request of the White House.

"The administration asked us to take a position," LaVigne said, adding that the Bush administration delivered \$300 million in disaster relief to the citrus industry after last year's hurricanes.

Last September, President Bush visited a hurricane-damaged grove and pledged to "make sure citrus remains a strong part of the state's economy," LaVigne said.

The industry also is seeking more than \$200 million for continued citrus canker eradication efforts and compensation for growers who have had trees removed in the battle against the bacterial disease.

Andy Taylor, chairman of the Florida Citrus Commission, said CAFTA "is neutral for citrus."

"Citrus imports from those countries already come in duty-free," Taylor said. The CAFTA countries, in addition to the Dominican Republic, are El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

But news of the vote raised hackles among the state's sugar cane growers, who argue that imports of sugar from the CAFTA countries will wipe out jobs here and put them out of business.

"It is unfortunate that this citrus organization took such a parochial view of their world that they have attempted to throw a major Florida agricultural commodity out of the life raft just to get a better seat," said Judy Sanchez, spokeswoman for U.S. Sugar Corp. in Clewiston.

Barbara Miedema, spokeswoman for the Belle Glade-based Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, called the stance shortsighted, and said the co-op is shocked and disappointed that the citrus industry would take such a position.

"A pro-CAFTA vote only opens the door to more outsourcing of Florida agricultural products," Miedema said. "What they have in essence done is hurt themselves."

LaVigne said that while he has concerns about sugar, the two industries differ. Sugar is working to keep imports out, and citrus wants to keep exporting juice and fruit while keeping a 29-cent-a-gallon tariff on Brazilian juice intact.

"Our main focus here is working with the administration," he said.

Tony Villamil, chief executive officer of the Washington Economics Group in Coral Gables and a consultant to Florida Citrus Mutual, spoke Wednesday to the board and applauded its CAFTA vote.

"This shows the enlightened leadership of this industry," Villamil said.

The citrus conference continues today with a visit from U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns, who will speak to the growers and then tour a Martin County grove infected with citrus canker.