Ci~rus prices to drop

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Fruit lovers in Louisiana can expect to pay less for their citrus during the upcoming season thanks to a recent federal ruling.

On Sept. 18, the U.S. Department of Agriculture lifted its six-year ban on Florida citrus grown in Manatee and parts of Hillsborough and Sarasota counties, thus permitting local buyers to purchase oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes, tangerines and satsumas.

“This means growers (in Florida) will have a chance to sell more as actual fruit and not in juice form,” said Bob Boyd, USDA plant protection and quarantine officer in charge of Louisiana.

The lifting of the ban came near the start of the Louisiana citrus season, mid-October through December, and produce market owners said consumers will benefit.

“It’ll make a difference,” said Connie Poe, a co-owner of Central Produce. “I’m sure it will be a positive note with consumers because of the cheaper prices. The market needs this break. We’re ready for a change.”

Poe said she usually sells her Valencia oranges for a dollar during the season, but this season shoppers may be able to purchase them for as low as 12 for a dollar.

The new ruling opens up markets that had been closed as a result of the quarantine, and allows growers to sell to states that formerly forbade the sale of Florida citrus.

“I can’t wait,” Poe said. “I think the quarantine was an injustice to the consumers who were forced to pay such high prices for the fruit.”

Poe and other local market owners had been predicting a poor season this year because of the freeze that Louisiana and Texas nurseries suffered last December.

“Texas pretty much lost what was available for export after the freeze,” said Tad Hardy, administrative coordinator at the state Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

The Florida citrus industry has been battling the nursery strain of citrus canker since early 1984. Almost 20 million trees and young plants at retail outlets, nurseries and groves were destroyed to prevent its spread into commercial groves.

Hardy said the government believed at first that an Asiatic strain of citrus canker may have hit Florida, but discovered later in the year that it was the nursery strain. Instead of lifting the quarantine, the government left it in place to conduct more tests.

“You’re better safe than sorry” when dealing with something this important, Hardy said.

In 1986, after extensive testing, the Asiatic strain was detected in one area of Florida.
The bacterial disease spreads quickly and easily by wind-driven rain, causing premature dropping of leaves and fruit. The disease has no effect on humans, but could affect other fruit because citrus fruit are grown in a close-knitted orchard.

But the nursery strain has been diagnosed by federal scientists as non-threatening.

The Asiatic strain, which has the potential to infect an entire orchard, remains under federal quarantine in Florida’s Manatee County. This strain is responsible for the eventual death of infected trees and has the potential to spread in other areas.

Many local produce market owners said they have been able to cope with the quarantine by purchasing citrus in other states, but for more expensive prices.

“We just bought our citrus fruit from California and Arizona,” said Andy Pizzolato, Southside Produce Co Inc. owner.

He said the lifting of the “needless quarantine” gives him a great feeling.”

Lillie Pizzolato, owner of Airline Fruit Market, said although the quarantine did not harm her business, she’s happy it has been lifted because “we have a better quality and larger supply of produce available.”

The USDA recently released information stating there has been a possible detection of the Asiatic strain in citrus in other areas of Florida and additional lab test results will be available by Monday, Boyd said.

“We won’t know anymore until then,” he said.