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News Release

USDA - Farm Service Agency Announces Support for Puerto Rico Citrus Growers Impacted by HLB (Citrus Greening)

(San Juan, Puerto Rico), May 14, 2015-- U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency State Executive Director Juan M. Ortiz Serbiá today announced that the Department has made available financial assistance to eligible Puerto Rico's citrus growers for the removal of trees afflicted with Huanglongbing (HLB, also known as citrus greening) and for replanting groves with new healthy stock. The support comes through USDA's Tree Assistance Program.

"We must ensure that Puerto Rico's citrus industry can weather this storm while a more permanent solution to this problem is developed. The key to the citrus industry's survival is getting new trees in the ground, and we're doing everything we can to help with that", said Ortiz.

HLB is a bacterial disease that spreads internally throughout the plant. The disease, which is transmitted from infected plants to healthy ones by the Asian citrus psyllid, causes fruit to ripen unevenly and become lopsided, visibly smaller and bitter-tasting. The bacteria do not pose a health threat to humans, livestock or pets, but the effect on the fruit crop is devastating.

"Because HLB damages and then kills citrus trees over time, USDA has expanded the Tree Assistance Program to allow Puerto Rico producers to remove and replace trees as they decline", said Ortiz. "Previously, to receive program assistance, all citrus tree deaths had to occur in one year, but now, farmers can receive support as trees decline or die over a period of up to six years".

Puerto Rico citrus growers will be eligible for up to 50 percent of the cost of the removal of diseased trees and site preparation, 65 percent of the cost of replanting and labor, and 65 percent of the cost of seedlings. The individual stands must have sustained a mortality loss in excess of 15 percent after adjustment for normal mortality. Trees that are no longer commercially viable may be considered to have met mortality. Growers are encouraged to contact their local USDA Farm Service Center for information on the types of records needed before applying, and to schedule an appointment. Supporting documents may include documentation of best management practices for HLB control, purchase receipts for eligible trees, planting and production records, and documentation of labor and equipment used to plant or remove eligible trees.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (866) 632-9992 (Toll-free Customer Service), (800) 877-8339 (Local or Federal relay), (866) 377-8642 (Relay voice users).

The Tree Assistance Program, administered by the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA), was made possible through the 2014 Farm Bill, which builds on historic economic gains in rural America over the past five years, while achieving meaningful reform and billions of dollars in savings for the taxpayer. Since enactment, USDA has made significant progress to implement each provision of this critical legislation, including providing disaster relief to farmers and ranchers; strengthening risk management tools; expanding access to rural credit; funding critical research; establishing innovative public-private conservation partnerships; developing new markets for rural-made products; and investing in infrastructure, housing and community facilities to help improve quality of life in rural America. For more information, visit www.usda.gov/farmbill.

For more information, producers may review the Tree Assistance Program fact sheet at www.fsa.usda.gov/TAPfactsheet or contact their local FSA office at <http://offices.usda.gov>.

Local FSA Offices: Adjuntas (787-829-2030); Arecibo (787-878-2580); Barranquitas (787-857-3940); Caguas (787-743-2203); Corozal (787-859-3978); Lares (787-897-4610); Mayagüez (787-831-3328); Ponce (787-841-3136); Utuado (787-894-4657).

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