

Berry poachers at heart of change in harvest rules

Harvest rules

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Treasure Coast Newspapers USA
TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

When saw palmetto berry pickers headed back into Florida's wilderness as the harvesting season began in August, it wasn't just the heat and wild animals they had to worry about.

This year, for the first time, they also needed permits.

The plant was designated this summer as "commercially exploited" in Florida, leaving pickers and buyers scrambling to learn the rules, and state Department of Agriculture workers wading through hundreds of rushed applications.

Dozens of rule violators have been arrested statewide, and the season is only halfway over.

The designation is one for native plant species removed in significant numbers from the wild and sold.

Saw palmetto is one of the most common plants in Florida, but conservationists worry it may not always be that way. The extract from ripe berries is used as a nutritional supplement in the United States and in prescriptions throughout Europe to treat prostate and urinary problems.

Between 45 and 50 million

pounds of berries are harvested each year in the United States, 80 percent of which is exported, according to estimates from Valensa International, a leading manufacturer based in Lake County.

The crop is almost exclusively found in Florida, and it's an entirely wild harvest. Nobody grows or farms it.

The U.S. market alone is valued at more than \$15 million, according to the American Botanical Council.

The idea behind permitting was to establish a paper trail in the lucrative cash industry to help law enforcement catch illegal harvesters and protect berries on both private and government lands.

"This is a Florida treasure. We have to make sure it's being responsibly cared for," said Bill Donovan, a senior vice president at Valensa International.

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Scott Connell, center, of Jensen Beach, dumps a bucket of saw palmetto berries into a bin to be weighed at Saw Palmetto of South Florida on Aug. 23 in Indiantown. Connell and fellow picker Jimmy Parker, left, harvested the 578 pounds of berries the night before and that morning before heading to the buyer. PHOTOS BY PATRICK DOVE/TCPALM



Yolanda Diego of Indiantown receives her money after weighing in more than 200 pounds of saw palmetto berries at Saw Palmetto of South Florida. "The berries are a commodity and the price per pound will fluctuate from day to day," said Michael Baker, owner of Saw Palmetto of South Florida.

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the state pay harvesters in cash, but keeping thousands of dollars on

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