

2005 among worst years in recent memory for Florida agriculture

Mike Schneider
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Hurricanes made 2005 one of the worst years in recent memory for agriculture in Florida, which supplies more than half of the nation's fresh vegetables between November and February.

The four storms that struck or brushed the state not only caused an estimated \$2.2 billion in damage to the state's crops and farming infrastructure, but they are believed to have spread dreaded citrus diseases that threaten the state's signature citrus crops.

"Nobody has seen this level of devastation for about 16 years," said Tim Nance, director of operations in the eastern United States for Gargiulo, one of the nation's largest growers of tomatoes.

The four hurricanes caused estimated damages of \$1.1 billion to the state's nursery and foliage industry, \$370 million to the sugar sector, \$180 million to citrus and \$44.1 million to tropical fruit, according to the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

Hurricane Wilma also has raised concerns about an impending labor shortage for Florida agriculture as workers have stayed away or taken construction jobs rebuilding damaged homes, industry executives said.

Gargiulo's operations in southwest Florida, for instance, usually attracts 1,000 workers in the winter but only about half that figure has returned this season.

Many tomato growers lost plants that had been in the ground for only a few weeks when Wilma flooded fields and tore up plastic mulch. Others have been trying to rehabilitate more mature plants that survived but likely won't be harvested until late January or early February.

Wilma's Oct. 24 sprint across Florida flattened sugar cane fields, blew off greenhouse roofs and drowned newly planted winter vegetables. It couldn't have come at a worse time—right after tomato and vegetable plants had been in the ground and close to the height of picking season.

"After late December and into January, produce is going to be very scarce," Nance said. "Of course, the cold season, we haven't even talked about that yet. In a worse-case scenario, God forbid, we could have other losses ahead."

Although wind damage from Wilma also trimmed the state's citrus production by 15 percent this season, the hurricane's more lasting effect may be the spread of citrus canker and tristeza, another dreaded disease that weakens the trees and cause them to die.

After a decade-long battle, state and federal agriculture workers had been close to eliminating canker, which causes fruit and leaves to drop prematurely, but the hurricanes of 2004 spread the disease to new areas in the heart of the state's citrus production.

Agriculture officials estimate that the 2005 hurricanes Wilma and Katrina could be responsible for further spreading canker to 183,000 acres, or a quarter of the state's commercial citrus groves.



Once canker is found in a grove, the state requires that citrus trees within a 1,900-foot radius be destroyed and a quarantine prohibiting the movement of fruit and trees usually is established.

The spread already has forced state and federal agriculture workers to either remove or plan to remove 82,000 acres of citrus, or more than 10 percent of the state's commercial citrus groves.

Florida is the world's top producer of grapefruit, providing more than a quarter of the world's supply, and produces 35 to 40 percent of the world's orange juice.

"It has been very sobering news," said Casey Pace, a spokeswoman for Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest growers group.