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## AGRICULTURE

# Shortage of citrus pickers looms

**A shortage of workers to pick the fruit is expected to leave millions of boxes of oranges unharvested, industry executives have predicted.**

**LAKELAND** - (AP) -- As many as six million boxes of oranges may go unharvested in Florida this year because of a shortage of fruit pickers made worse by fears about what changes may come in immigration law.

The citrus season usually ends in late June but will extend to at least late July this year with juice processors hoping to get as many oranges as possible off trees.

"There's very little doubt we'll leave a significant amount of fruit on the tree," said Mike Carlton, director of production and labor affairs at Florida Citrus Mutual. "Whether that's three million boxes or six million boxes, nobody can say."

There were about nine million boxes of Valencia oranges still on trees this week, The Ledger reported Sunday.

Orange production in the state could become the lowest since 1992 if the worst projections come true. That year, growers harvested 139.8 million boxes.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is scheduled to release its final citrus crop projection Wednesday. Its June 9 report forecast 153 million boxes of oranges.

Growers have reported difficulty finding enough workers.

Industry officials say labor supply was tight from the beginning of the season in October but grew worse by the middle of May when a large segment of the Hispanic labor force seemed to leave the state.

"The labor shortage is what held us up this year," said Dave Crumbly, vice president of fruit control at Florida's Natural Growers in Lake Wales, the nation's third-largest citrus processor.

"Because labor was marginal at best," he said, "it didn't take much to push it into a shortage."

Industry officials cited the talk of immigration crackdowns for their inability to find Hispanic workers, who make up much of Florida's farm work force.

Lake Wales citrus grower Marty McKenna, who manages about 4,000 grove acres, said word had spread through the Hispanic community to return home if they wanted U.S. jobs in the future.

The state's largest processor, Tropicana Products Inc. in Bradenton, plans to stay open through July 21, said Peter Brace, a spokesman for parent company PepsiCo Inc. in Chicago.