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AGRICULTURE

'05 storms took a big bite out of crops

Hurricanes in 2005 caused \$2.2 billion to Florida's crops and farm infrastructure, losses not seen since 1989's freeze.

BY MIKE SCHNEIDER

Associated Press

ORLANDO - Vegetable pickers are harvesting only about half the volume of tomatoes and peppers that they normally would this time of year at the Six Ls farm in southwest Florida where Hurricane Wilma's destructive winds tore through fields in October.

"We had total devastation of anything that was four weeks of age or younger," said Jamie Williams, a Six Ls official.

Hurricanes made 2005 one of the worst years in recent memory for Florida agriculture. Four storms that struck the state not only caused an estimated \$2.2 billion in damage to the state's crops and farming infrastructure, but the storms are believed to have spread dreaded citrus diseases that threaten the state's signature citrus crops.

"We haven't had a loss of this magnitude since the freeze of 1989," said Tim Nance, director of operations in the eastern United States for Gargiulo, one of the nation's largest growers of tomatoes. "Nobody has seen this level of devastation for about 16 years."

A GRIM TALLY

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.

Wilma also has raised concerns about an impending labor shortage for Florida agriculture as workers have stayed away or taken jobs in construction rebuilding damaged homes, industry executives said. Gargiulo's operations in southwest Florida, for instance, usually attract 1,000 workers in the winter but only about half that number has returned this season.

Hurricane Wilma's late-season sprint across Florida flattened sugar cane fields, blew off greenhouse roofs and drowned newly planted winter vegetables. Florida supplies more than half the nation's fresh vegetables between November and February.

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

Wilma's winds 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 scare," 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 affect may be the spread of citrus canker and tristeza, another dreaded disease that weakens the trees and cause them to die.

FIGHTING CITRUS CANKER

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

After a decade-long battle, state and federal agriculture workers had been close to eliminating citrus 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. The 2005 hurricanes exacerbated the problem.

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 agriculture officials have concluded citrus greening, a disease deadly to citrus trees that was first discovered in Florida in September and is spread by an insect, cannot be eradicated and they will try to control its spread to minimize the impact.