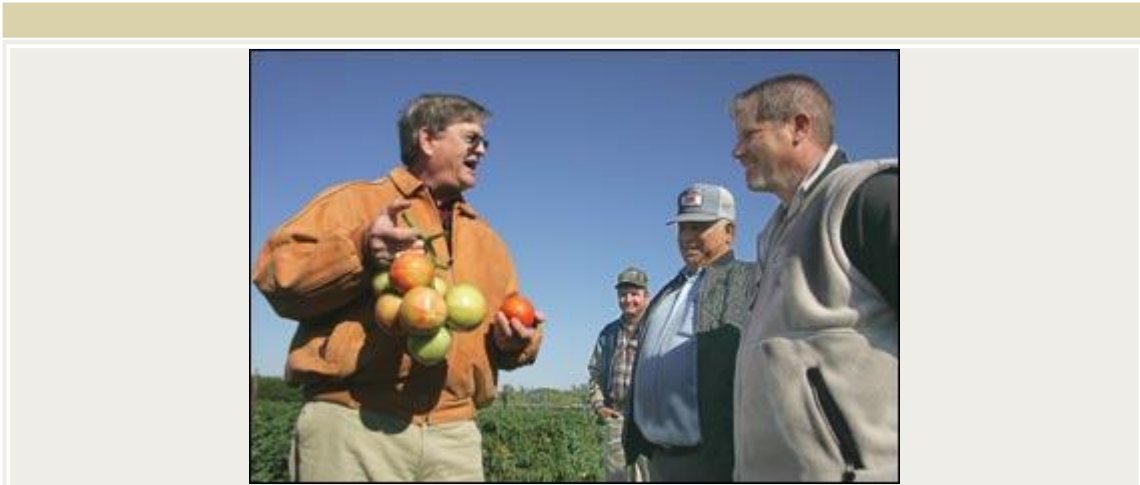


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**IN THE RED:** Florida Agricultural Commissioner Charles H. Bronson, far left, visited with tomato growers, from left to right, Kern Carpenter, Freddy Strano and Tony DiMare. The farmers complain that artificially high retail prices are forcing them leave their tomatoes rotting. RAUL RUBERIA/HERALD STAFF

## Tomato growers have rotten year

Tomatoes go bad in the fields as growers struggle to turn a profit amid serious demand problems

BY JIM WYSS

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Freddy Strano had just decided to let another 20 acres of ripened tomatoes rot in his Homestead field when a friend called him from New York.

"Congratulations, you must be a rich man, tomatoes are selling up here for \$48 dollars a box [about \$1.92 per pound]," said his friend, a priest. "I'm expecting more money in the communion plate."

Probably won't happen. Strano says he hasn't made a dime from tomatoes since November.

A tomato shortage exacerbated by Florida's hurricanes sent prices as high as \$3 per pound last fall. But since Thanksgiving, Florida's fields have been flush with crops. Now it's tomato buyers who are in short supply. Growers complain supermarkets have scared away consumers by keeping prices artificially high.

During the last two weeks, the state's 65 commercial tomato producers have let 60 million pounds die on the vine because they couldn't sell them, says growers coalition Florida Farmers. Those that do sell go cheap -- local growers said they are hard pressed to get 15 to 20 cents per pound from wholesalers.

"There's a complete disconnect with prices on the farm and what the consumers are forced to pay," said Florida Farmers' Chairman Paul J. DiMare. "In my 22 years in the business I've never seen a demand situation this bad."

The complaints led Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson to tour South Miami-Dade farms Tuesday and announce a national campaign aimed at bringing down retail prices and spurring consumption.

"It will be a concentrated effort inside and outside of Florida to let people know that there are plenty of tomatoes down here," Bronson said.

His department's marketing division is rolling out a program called Storming Across America, a name playing in part on last year's hurricane season. The state will offer incentives to retailers to put tomatoes in their printed circulars.

"We're not walking in with messianic solutions, but we do have some ideas," marketing division Director Nelson Mongiovi said.

## **INFLATED PRICES**

According to a national survey commissioned by the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association Jan. 5, tomatoes at a Wal-Mart in Atlanta were selling for \$3.70 and at an A&P in New York for \$3.99.

Florida grocery stores have been quicker to bring down their prices, the association said.

But even here prices vary wildly. Dolores Herrera owns the Latin Grill N' Chop restaurant in Homestead, in the heart of tomato country, and just a few doors down from a Winn Dixie. Although she has been tempted to make a last-minute shopping run to their produce section, she has always resisted the urge.

"I've never been in there because my clients tell me it's expensive," she says.

While Winn Dixie was selling large tomatoes for \$1.29 per pound on Tuesday, she said she could buy 50 pounds for between \$14 and \$19 dollars -- about 30 cents per pound -- from smaller shops.

Mongiovi said he's been surprised at the strength of the food service industry's reaction to price increases. "We even heard anecdotal evidence about a Taco Bell where they asked 'Do you want tomatoes with that taco?' Of course we want tomatoes with that taco."

Handing out tomatoes to passersby on Tuesday, Strano said the government's campaign to boost consumption needed to work fast.

## **GROWING PROBLEMS**

"Every week that goes by is another field we don't harvest," he said. "In my 40 years of farming I've never gone through anything like this."

Strano says he hasn't been able to get more than about 16 cents a pound from wholesalers in weeks.

"It costs between \$6,000 and \$7,000 to pick and pack an acre," he said. "But at these prices it actually costs us money to harvest. It just doesn't make any sense."

Since November he has been forced to let 80 acres go bad.

*This report was supplemented by Herald wire services. The Miami Herald*