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Farmers suffer another major blow

Still reeling from Katrina, South Dade farmers have lost millions of dollars in devastated crops and damaged infrastructure.

BY Christina Hoag

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South Dade farmers are looking at nearly \$250 million in lost crops and structural damage just two months after suffering hundreds of millions in destruction from Hurricane Katrina, agricultural officials reported Tuesday.

Hurricane Wilma left a huge swath of collapsed greenhouses, uprooted seedlings, destroyed crops and toppled trees across Miami-Dade's agricultural heartland.

"It's pretty heartbreaking to see it," said Donald W. Pybas, Miami-Dade County extension director of the University of Florida. "A lot of growers are in shock. They were just getting back on their feet after Katrina."

Florida's agriculture commissioner, Charles Bronson, is expected to tour the hard-hit area today.

"We anticipate the damage is going to be quite heavy," said Terry McElroy, spokesman for the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, sweet corn and beans may be wiped out, as well as nursery buildings, he said.

Pybas said preliminary damage is estimated at \$217.6 million in lost crops, including avocados and tropical fruits, and \$31.5 million in buildings such as shadehouses.

At least half of the area's tropical fruit tree groves are in ruins, he said.

Farmers and agriculture officials said Wilma's havoc was extensive wherever its fierce winds hit in the state. While Hurricane Katrina left plants and equipment drowned in water, Wilma left them shredded by wind.

Brooks Tropicals, one of South Dade's biggest avocado growers, said that between both hurricanes, 70,000 avocado trees and their fruit were decimated.

"We've lost basically the entire crop -- \$12 million," said Craig Wheeling, chief executive of Brooks. "But we'll get the trees back up again. This is manageable."

Other tropical fruit trees took a beating, too. Wheeling estimated that 95 percent of South Dade's carambola crop was destroyed.

Wheeling was also concerned that a cargo of papaya from Brooks' plantations in Central America currently en route would spoil since Port Everglades remained closed and the ship cannot dock.

Kerry's Bromeliads, a Homestead bromeliad and orchid grower, lost millions of plants, as well as shadehouses and greenhouses, said owner Kerry Herndon, who estimated the total damage at \$30 million.

"It'll be a 100 percent loss," he said. "All of our roofs are gone. These are shade-loving plants. They'll all be sunburned."

Agriculture all over the state was pummeled.

Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar's western cane fields were "flat as a pancake," said Robert E. Coker, senior vice president of public affairs. To the east, fields are full of broken cane stalks, he added.

Numerous buildings, including the refinery, suffered damage.

"It's quite extensive," Coker said.