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Farm plight: Tense times, millions in damages

After Hurricane Katrina, farmers, growers and laborers who depend on agriculture for their livelihood are reeling.

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Steadying herself with a mop, Angelica Rubio leaned out of her back door to chide her three kids as they strayed too far into the waist-high lake that was once a dusty backyard. She nervously eyed the flooded tree farm barely visible across the street.

"There's no way anybody's going to be able to go in there and work," said Rubio, who lives in a small community of migrant workers clustered in cinder block homes at the far edge of Homestead's Campbell Drive.

Since Hurricane Katrina soaked South Miami-Dade, Rubio -- whose husband works in the nurseries and packing houses -- has kept an anxious watch on the rows of palm trees, praying for the water to recede.

"Nobody knows what's going to happen," Rubio said. "Nobody knows, and we're worried."

As Miami-Dade's agricultural community reels, the farmers, growers and laborers who depend on the industry for their livelihood are tense with uncertainty.

Early estimates place the damage at \$400 million, with nursery owners taking the biggest hit. Katrina's high waters and heavy winds inundated acres of carefully tended bromeliads and hibiscus, toppled row upon row of palm trees and shredded outbuildings and shade screens that once sheltered delicate greenery.

The full damage to Miami-Dade's billion-dollar agricultural industry -- second to tourism as the county's top money generator -- will take some time to assess.

"Those are just preliminary numbers," said Don Pybas, director of the University of Florida's Cooperative Extension Service in Miami-Dade County. He spent a large chunk of Saturday going over damage estimates with county officials and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which orchestrates disaster relief for farmers.

AVOCADO GROVES

Especially troubling is the fate of the county's avocado groves, Pybas said. Spread over roughly 7,000 acres, the groves have suffered about \$11 million worth of damage.

But with the flooded groves far from drying out, the long-term prospects of even ostensibly healthy trees could be grim.

"After two days of being wet, you start to worry about root rot," Pybas said. "You won't see anything for six months to a year. But the trees will diminish and eventually die."

The impact on South Miami-Dade's labor force may not be felt for a while, either. But in the coming days, at least, there is plenty of work to go around.

"Anyone willing to work is going to find a job cleaning up," Pybas said.

Luckily -- or what passed for luck last week in South Florida -- Katrina hit at the tail end of the fruit-picking season, just before most farmers began to plant the bulk of such winter row crops as tomatoes, peppers and beans.

'IT'S NOT EASY'

Augustín Huerta, a farmworker who lives in Florida City, said he hopes he can hold out until the heavy planting season begins in a few weeks. He normally counts on work harvesting avocados until the end of the summer, but Katrina knocked much of the fruit off the trees, leaving them too bruised or waterlogged for growers to salvage.

"I need to find some work, at least until it's time for squash to go in the ground," Huerta said.

"It's not easy. I have five kids, and they need to eat," he said.

Pausing for a moment, he scooped up his youngest, 2-year-old Mari Magdalena, and gave her a tight hug.

Before she was born, Huerta would leave behind his wife and kids to follow the picking season -- up through the Carolinas and back down through Texas and Orlando before returning home. In the last two years, he's been able to save enough money -- and find enough steady farm work locally -- to allow him to stay with his family year round.

"I hope I won't have to start traveling again," he said. "I will have to worry about that soon, though. As if there wasn't enough to worry about."

The Huertas' worries will be a common concern throughout the farmworker community, said Maria Garza, a longtime activist and director of the South Dade Skills Center.

"These people are below everybody's radar," said Garza, a former migrant worker who worked the fields as a child.

The farmers have such safety nets as insurance and federal aid, and rightly so, she said.

"But these workers are completely at the mercy of someone else."

Of the 30,000 people employed by Miami-Dade's agricultural industry, about 6,000 are true migrant workers, meaning they travel from state to state throughout the year, Garza said. Another 15,000 are seasonal workers -- laborers who shift their job with each season but have managed, like Huerta, to put down permanent roots.

ESTIMATES

She fears that with the damage dealt to the nurseries, they may be hard pressed to stay put.

According to preliminary estimates, three-fourths of the \$400 million in damage can be found among South Miami-Dade's nurseries.

Hilario Borrego, who owns a 15-acre nursery along Krome Avenue, said he and his grandson have hauled away at least 5,00 plants ruined by the storm.

"We had the good luck that it was only that," Borrego said.

Across the street, the owner of Father and Daughter nursery -- which has sites on Krome, as well as farther west -- fared much worse.

"There are just trees floating around," said Joaquin San Juan, who estimates his losses at more than \$200,000. A massive ficus crushed one of his outbuildings, toppled pine trees are strewn around his rooftop and hundreds of potted plants are now bobbing around his property like buoys.

He worries about the men who depend on him for their livelihood. San Juan said he marshalled a crew of eight Saturday morning, putting them to work tidying up the mist houses, repairing plastic liners and saving whatever plants they could.

"I know they have their bills, too," said San Juan, who vows he'll stay open despite the damage.

"I'll keep them on, even if it's just part time."

Crop damages assessed

University of Florida and Miami-Dade County Extension Service experts have estimated crop losses due to Hurricane Katrina at more than \$427 million, with almost three-quarters of that total from the destruction of ornamental crops -- ranging from cut flowers to field plants.

The figures, compiled by a group of agencies, placed ornamental crop losses at \$370 million, followed by \$30 million in losses to fruit crops and \$25.5 million in vegetable crop losses.

The loss estimate doesn't include the destruction of shade houses, nurseries and other installations in the county's agricultural area.

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson, along with other state, federal and county officials, plans to tour Homestead today to view the damage.

Growers in the area report that water in groves and nurseries is receding, but tree roots remain threatened by subsurface water. "The water is going down," said Medora Krome of Krome Groves in the Redlands. "But if you've got water for three days, you are badly hurt even if you don't have water above ground."