

Hurricane Irma could cost Florida 10% of its orange crop

Florida officials said Tuesday that getting a full picture of the devastation caused by Irma could take weeks. What remains unknown?: Exactly how much damage the crops suffered, how much producers might recover from crop insurance, and how much more people might have to pay for their morning orange juice.

"Irma went right up the middle. It didn't matter where you were, because Irma was so wide," said Mark Hudson, the Florida state statistician with the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Extension and Farm Service Agency agents have just started evaluating the losses, he said, "if they can get fuel and if they can get out."

Florida's orange harvest usually begins around Thanksgiving, and about 90 percent of it becomes juice. Projections for the 2016-2017 growing season had called for 68.5 million boxes of oranges and 7.8 million boxes of grapefruit. The orange crop was worth over \$886 million, according to USDA figures, while the grapefruit crop was worth nearly \$110 million.

"Before Hurricane Irma, there was a good chance we would have more than 75 million boxes of oranges on the trees this season, we now have much less," said Shannon Stepp, executive director of the Florida Department of Citrus. Initial reports indicate Irma's winds knocked lot of fruit to the ground but uprooted relatively few trees, which will help growers in the long term.

Lisa Lochridge, a spokeswoman for the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, said reports indicate a 50 percent to 70 percent crop loss in South Florida, depending on the region, with losses "only slightly less going north." Joel Widenor, co-founder of Commodity Weather Group, forecast the overall orange crop loss at 10 percent and the grapefruit loss at 20 percent to 30 percent.

Florida is a key source of fresh fruits and vegetables for the rest of the country in the winter. In many cases those crops aren't in the ground yet, or it's early enough to replant. But particularly for tomatoes and strawberries, Lochridge said, some fields about to be planted were damaged. So she said the tomato crop is expected to be light in early November, though officials expect a solid December. Strawberry growers expect to recover quickly and harvest on time, she said.

"A big concern for growers is finding available workers to help them in their recovery efforts," Lochridge said. "The labor supply was already very tight."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture will issue its first forecast of Florida's 2017-18 citrus crop on Oct. 12.

Frozen orange juice concentrate futures, which provide a glimpse at what might happen to consumer prices, spiked last week as Irma bore down but slipped this week. Coca-Cola, whose brands include Minute Maid and Simply juices, said its juice operations are already back up and running.

Chet Townsend, editor of the Citrus Daily newsletter who also owns a five-acre grove near Fort Denaud in southwestern Florida, got his first good look at the damage driving around his area Tuesday morning.

"I've never seen so much fruit down, even after a freeze," he said.

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