

Posted on Sat, Jan. 14, 2006

AGRICULTURE

High tomato prices will soon subside -- meanwhile, you'll have to ask for tomatoes on that wendy's burger

By Steve Harrison

sharrison@MiamiHerald.com

The photograph on the menu shows a juicy burger dressed with a juicy tomato.

But at many Wendy's restaurants nationwide, the tomato now comes only if you ask -- the result of Hurricane Wilma wrecking much of the Florida winter tomato crop.

"We just can't get the quantity and quality of the tomatoes we want," said Wendy's spokesman Bob Bertini.

Florida farmers -- who provide most of America's winter tomato supply -- insist this year's shortage isn't as severe as 2004, when hurricanes Charley, Frances and Jeanne caused massive price spikes. These days, tomato prices are hovering between \$2.50 and \$2.90 a pound; they usually cost a \$1 a pound. Last winter's spike reached \$3.50, according to a Publix spokesperson.

But Florida's tomato growers are worried that this year's high prices could lead to a repeat of last winter's roller-coaster price "catastrophe," as the Dade County Farm Bureau called it.

After 2004's record hurricane season, consumer's appetite for tomatoes vanished with the record prices. When a large crop was harvested in January, there were no buyers, as consumers were perhaps scared by prices that had more than tripled.

Growers charged bitterly that grocery stores didn't lower prices fast enough to entice buyers.

Florida growers ended up donating 700,000 pounds of unsold tomatoes to food banks nationwide.

"So many users were turned off by the price," said Reggie Brown of the Maitland-based Florida Tomato Committee, a marketing group. "When we returned with volume, we literally left acres of tomatoes in the field."

South Florida grower Paul DiMare said he fears the same thing could happen again.

"The problem is the market doesn't react fast enough," DiMare said. "Tomatoes are perishables, and need to be sold. With potatoes or citrus, you can do stuff with it. Not tomatoes."

Florida is a major domestic tomato supplier from October to June, and in the winter months it supplies almost all tomatoes eaten by Americans. Mexican exports contribute the rest.

Wholesale prices for top-quality tomatoes are generally between \$8 and \$10 for a 25-pound box. The current price is about \$34.

DiMare, one of Florida's largest growers, was frustrated by Wendy's decision to offer tomatoes only when asked. Growers have made a special effort to ensure fast-food restaurants are supplied, he said.

Tomatoes now being picked were planted before Wilma, and their plants were battered by the storm.

Tomatoes planted after Wilma should be ready by late January or February.

"We are about to start picking in Homestead and the lower east coast, in Delray Beach and Pompano. Immokalee -- because it's colder -- will lag a few weeks behind," Brown said.

Said Publix spokeswoman Maria Brous: "The good news is prices aren't at an all-time high. And the prices should start to go down soon."

A Burger King spokesperson said the Miami-based fast-food chain hasn't had any problem securing tomatoes. McDonalds hasn't rationed the fruit either.

Last winter, Wendy's served tomatoes on an ask-only basis for about a month. Bertini said he expects this year's cutbacks to only last two weeks.

This report was supplemented with information from the Associated Press.

Wendy's sees tomato shortage because of Florida storms

Associated Press, Posted on Thu, Jan. 12, 2006

DUBLIN, Ohio - Tomatoes are available by request only at Wendy's restaurants, a short-term policy that began in late December because of crop damage from hurricanes in Florida.

Hurricanes made 2005 one of the worst years in recent memory for agriculture in Florida, which supplies more than half of the nation's fresh vegetables between November and February.

"We use larger size tomatoes in sandwiches and haven't been able to secure them with the quality and quantity that we would like," said Bob Bertini, a spokesman for Wendy's International Inc. Signs posted in the restaurants advise customers of the shortage.

Bertini said he's not aware of a drop in sales at Wendy's, the nation's third-largest fast-food chain.

Oak Brook, Ill.-based McDonald's Corp., the No. 1 chain, said Thursday it is not facing a similar shortage.

"We do not have any tomato shortages and we do not anticipate any because of our good planning," spokeswoman Lisa Howard said. "We have contingency plans if there are any issues, but we haven't had any."

Miami-based Burger King Corp., the second-largest chain, did not return calls for comment.

Bertini said the shortage could end in a few weeks when new crops become available. The company uses about 85 million pounds of tomatoes a year. Most come from Florida during the winter months, with some from growers in California.

The four storms that struck or brushed Florida caused an estimated \$2.2 billion in damage to the state's crops and farming infrastructure.

Hurricane Wilma's Oct. 24 sprint across Florida came right after tomato and vegetable plants had been in the ground and near the height of picking season.