

Posted on Wed, Feb. 15, 2006

## AGRICULTURE

# Freezing temperatures pummel vegetable farmers

**South Central Florida vegetable farmers will be scouring their fields today to see what if any of their corn and green bean crops survived Tuesday morning's freeze.**

By Phil Long

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**LAKE WALES** - Rocked by Hurricane Wilma in the fall and slammed Tuesday morning by a late-season freeze, some Florida vegetable farmers are reeling.

Damage will be well into the millions, but it is still a day or two early to judge the impact of sub-freezing temperatures, growers and industry leaders said.

"We got hammered," said John Hundley, a farmer whose grandfather began farming western Palm Beach County land in 1935. "We estimate we have lost 1,800 to 2,000 acres of mainly sweet corn and green beans."

Some areas of the state's famed winter vegetable garden saw more than six hours of below-freezing temperatures on Tuesday, Hundley said.

"That just killed us," Hundley said. "It was amazing."

Before the freeze hit, he said, workers pumped water onto the ditches in the fields in an effort to keep the area as warm as possible. And through the night helicopters flew over the fields, stirring the air, trying to force warmer air down to the surface.

None of it worked, Hundley said.

This is a time when key crops like beans and corn are maturing for harvest and sale for the Easter holiday in April.

There are at least 25,000 acres of sweet corn and 12,000 of green beans in the Everglades agricultural area of western Palm Beach and Hendry counties, Hundley said, plus many acres of several varieties of lettuce, radishes and celery.

Both citrus and strawberries -- the other main winter crops -- fared much better.

Under a bright full moon, Lake Wales citrus grower Pat McKenna drove through hundreds of acres of groves during the night making sure his wells and pumps were distributing warm water to the rows of orange and grapefruit trees in the gently rolling Polk County hills.

Daybreak brought a layer of frost on the leaves of some trees, but he didn't expect long-term damage. The chilly crystals likely killed some the newest bloom and leaves, he said.

Statewide, citrus fared well, said Casey Pace, spokesperson for the state's largest citrus grower association, Florida Citrus Mutual.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services will do what it can to help farmers as soon as the extent of the damage becomes known, said Liz Compton, who is a spokesperson for state Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson.