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Florida's orange crop expected to drop even lower this year

By Jim Ellis

Associated Press Writer

ORLANDO, Fla. --

Florida's orange crop is expected to drop about 11 percent more than last year's already-low figures, as growers slowly recover from hurricanes, citrus disease and a freeze, the federal government said Friday.

Orange production is expected to fall 18 percent nationwide this year due to Florida's problems and a devastating California freeze, which could cause already-high juice prices to climb more, Agriculture Department officials said.

Florida's crop is expected to be 132 million boxes of oranges for the 2006-2007 season, down from 147.7 million boxes last year. Before two nasty hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005, the nation's top orange grower averaged about 220 million boxes, each weighing 90 pounds.

"Thousands of acres of trees were taken out of production because of hurricanes and citrus canker disease," said Jeff Geuder, chief of the crops branch at the department's National Agricultural Statistics Service. A February 2006 freeze was also a factor, he said.

Citrus canker disease destroyed 62 percent of the nursery trees in the Florida, severely limiting the acreage in groves that can be replanted over the next three years, a University of Florida study found. The bacterial disease devastates trees, leaving oranges with brown, raised lesions.

But the smaller crop means growers could see orange prices rise even higher, Geuder said. About 90 percent of Florida oranges are used for juice.

Orange juice lovers have seen the cost of the breakfast favorite rise 80 cents a gallon over last year, said Susan Pollack, an economist with the Agriculture Department.

In an already sluggish orange juice market, higher prices on the shelf don't help, Pollack said.

"Americans just don't drink as much orange juice as they use to," she said.

Florida had its second-best season ever - with 242 million boxes - in 2003-04, before hurricanes ravaged groves throughout the state months later. Not since the Christmas

freeze in 1989 has the orange crop in Florida dropped this low, said Bill Curtis, a research analyst.

"The vast majority of the oranges have been harvested and there just isn't any more fruit," said Walt Lincer, vice president of sales and marketing for Florida's Natural Growers, a cooperative of about 1,000 growers.

The low crop yields are not going to change anytime soon, Lincer said. Orange trees require seven to 10 years to mature and produce fruit.

"It can't come back in one year," Lincer said. "This isn't like planting tomatoes."

Urbanization and development could also be a factor, said Tom Spreen, chairman of the Food and Resource Economics Department of the University of Florida. The expense of rehabilitating destroyed groves may prompt some growers to sell, he said.

California, the No. 2 orange state, is experiencing massive unemployment in its citrus market, said Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual, a trade group. A damaging freeze in January lowered the state's forecast to 37 million boxes - a 39 percent drop from last year.

"The season that usually runs into June will come to a rapid end next month," said Nelsen, who said he expects the loss to be even greater than federal estimates.

California takes a \$3.5 million hit to its economy for every 1,000 acres of citrus lost, Nelsen said. The freeze destroyed the equivalent of about 80,000 acres in the state, he said, meaning a loss of about \$280 million.

California fruit is typically sold in grocery stores. Consumers nationwide are seeing smaller orange displays in supermarkets and higher prices and will begin experiencing "substantial shortages" over the next few months, Nelsen said.