

Posted on Tue, Apr. 10, 2007

## Growers wait for frost damage estimates

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COLUMBIA, S.C. --

The weekend cold snap damaged crops across the Southeast and parts of the Midwest, and was especially devastating for fruit growers.

"I don't think there'll be a good peach out of South Carolina this year," said Raymond Cook, who grows 60 acres of peaches each season. "It's the worst I've ever seen."

Growers from West Virginia to North Carolina to Texas spent the weekend trying to save their crops as temperatures fell into the 20s, including a record low of 21 in North Carolina. Ice coated highways and heavy snow shut down a whole weekend's worth of baseball in Cleveland.

Cost estimates for crop damage aren't expected until later in the week, but Georgia's agriculture commissioner is already saying he might ask for federal aid.

"We know there is significant amount of damage through most of state, but it's too early to give what the final analysis will be," said Tommy Irvin, Georgia's agriculture chief.

"By the middle of the week we'll know just how severe it is," said South Carolina Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers. South Carolina is the nation's second-largest peach producing state after California.

Some growers said that although fruit grown in other states and South America will remain available, lovers of fresh, locally grown fruit could end up paying more for apples and other produce.

"There'll be some gaps in supply and the prices will be higher," said Ronnie Best, manager of North Carolina's Raleigh Farmers Market, one of five such markets run by the state. "Anybody who survived this will be asking a premium price."

The frost appears to have destroyed this year's apple harvest in North Carolina's Henderson County, one of the largest apple-growing counties in the Southeast with a crop of nearly 3.3 million bushels last year.

"I just can't believe there is anything that will come through with it being so cold for three nights," said Joseph Stepp, owner of Stepp Orchard in Edneyville.

In Blount County, Ala., about 30 miles north of Birmingham, farmer James Witt said his plums, peaches and pecans were completely lost. Crop damage in Chilton County ranged

from 30 percent to 80 percent, depending on elevation, said Bobby Boozer, an area horticulturist.

In West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle, Alan Gibson's apple orchard was damaged by hail early in the season. After the weekend's three days of freezing temperatures, he predicted a total loss on the 3,000 trees in his small, pick-your-own orchard at Harpers Ferry.

Fruit has shriveled in Georgia and leaves are turning black, said Frank Funderburk, an agricultural extension agent in Peach County, the heart of Georgia's peach-growing region.

South Carolina raised 100 million pounds of peaches last year, but when temperatures dipped into the 20s in 1996 the state produced just 6.6 million pounds, according to Rhonda Brandt, director of the federal agriculture department in South Carolina.

South Carolina grower Stacey Hardy used sprinklers to coat blueberries and strawberries with a layer of ice as protection. Experts say heat generated by the transformation of sprayed water into ice can keep plants healthy.

"We've been up for four nights, but we think we've protected them," said Hardy, of Hardy Berry Farm in Anderson. "This year was the worst."

But in North Carolina, Doug Carrigan estimated that he lost up to 25 percent of his 100,000 strawberry plants near Mooresville despite irrigation.

The damage extended into southern Illinois.

"There's nothing alive. They're all dead," Tom Schwartz said Monday of the baby peaches at his orchard near Centralia, Ill. "They say you pay your bills with apples and make your money with peaches. This year, you're not going to make anything on either side."

Associated Press writers Jim Suhr in St. Louis, Dorie Turner in Atlanta and Vicki Smith in Morgantown, W.Va., contributed to this report.