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AGRICULTURE

No U.S. aid for tomato growers

Efforts to compensate tomato growers for damages related to the salmonella outbreak fell short in Washington.

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Florida tomato growers and packers like Billy Don Grant are going to have keep dreaming about any compensation from the federal government to offset the millions they lost due to this summer's salmonella outbreak.

While Congress was busy bailing out the financial services industry, efforts to seek compensation for the tomato growers died -- at least for this year and potentially for good -- during the closing weeks of the session. Growers in Florida estimate they lost at least \$60 million, and nationally that number is estimated at \$140 million or more.

"This was outside of our control and we had nothing to do with it," said Grant, whose North Florida packing houses and farming operation lost about \$12 million. "It's just not fair. We were devastated because they made a mistake. What we're asking for is a minimal amount of money compared to the hundreds of millions that they've given other farming entities."

Grant and others in North Florida were among the hardest hit of Florida's tomato growers because their June season coincided with the time tomatoes from Florida were scrutinized as a potential cause of the largest salmonella outbreak in the last decade. Ultimately, laboratory tests found links to Mexican peppers, but federal officials have refused to exonerate tomatoes from Florida or anywhere else.

U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, with the support of other Florida Democrats including Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston, introduced a bill seeking \$100 million in emergency financial assistance for the tomato industry. But the bill never made it out of the House Agriculture Committee and never got a companion bill in the Senate.

In the waning days of the session, there was an attempt to add the growers assistance into the massive Congressional Appropriations bill that provides ongoing funding for all government activities through the end of the year. But that ran into a roadblock from one or more senators who have been critical of the Florida tomato growers because of their

refusal to support worker compensation agreements reached between fast-food chains and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers.

The agreements typically call for workers to earn an additional penny per pound for the tomatoes they pick, money that would be paid by the fast-food chains. But the growers have refused to participate in those agreements, and without their participation the deals have not been implemented.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, Ind-Vt., made it known that he wouldn't support any legislation that included compensation for the tomato growers because of the conflict over worker wages.

Michael Briggs, a spokesman for Sanders, said the senator felt the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange came to Washington for a "government bailout."

"Sen. Sanders is less than sympathetic to bailing out an industry which pays its workers abysmal wages, has been involved in a number of cases of human slavery and continues to adamantly oppose all efforts to improve the lives of some of the most exploited workers in America," Briggs said in a statement. "The Florida Tomato Growers Exchange needs to clean up its house before it asks for a taxpayer bailout."

Although Sanders' objections weren't the only issue, it certainly may have been a final straw at a time when Congressional leaders couldn't afford to let major legislation get bogged down in extraneous debate.

A spokeswoman for the Coalition for Immokalee Workers did not respond Wednesday afternoon to a request for comment.

The point Sanders and others may have missed is that Florida growers would have received only a portion of the \$100 million in compensation that would have also gone to growers in Georgia, South Carolina, California and beyond.

Also, even within Florida the growers who would have received the compensation are not located in the Immokalee area because those farms were already long finished with their growing season when the salmonella scare hit.

"It's sad that they've linked a labor dispute from a group that doesn't represent a majority of the workers and allowed them to overshadow a major screw-up by the federal government that harmed an entire industry," said Bob Spencer of West Coast Tomato in Palmetto. "It's typical Congress. Politicians just love to grandstand. We're not going to sit around waiting on them. We're just going to go back to work and try to survive as an industry."

Mahoney still holds out hope of trying again for the growers -- as long as he is reelected in November.

"I was disappointed that our efforts to get tomato growers compensated for their losses did not succeed this session," Mahoney said in a statement. "I will work with my

colleagues next session to reintroduce legislation so that we can preserve jobs in this industry, which are critical for Florida's economy."