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## Tomato squeeze: Supply down from the freeze

Fallout from the big freeze is taking a toll as fast-food chains and stores struggle to get enough tomatoes on shelves.

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It's not a mistake if your Whopper arrives without the usual two slices of tomatoes.

Burger King restaurants across the country have been running out of tomatoes sporadically for the past week, and that's likely to continue in the aftermath of the freeze that devastated Florida's tomato crop last month.

The freeze hit growers at a time when the state normally would be supplying tomatoes for the majority of the East Coast.

The shortages have left fast-food chains, supermarkets and restaurants scrambling.

So far, the tomato shortage is having limited impact on the consumer. But that could change in coming weeks as competition for scarce tomatoes heats up.

Subway's solution has been to reduce the size of the tomatoes it uses and switch the source from Florida to Mexico. But it hasn't been easy. The company's purchasing cooperative is chasing down trucks and shifting the product among distribution centers to keep up with demand.

Subway workers find themselves having to play quality control experts, weeding out tomatoes that don't meet the company's standards.

"You order 12 trucks and you get eight," said Jan Risi, president and chief executive of Subway's Independent Purchasing Cooperative, based in Kendall. "When you ask where are the others, the answer is they're on the way. The supply is sketchy at best."

While grocery stores such as Publix, Winn-Dixie and Whole Foods haven't run out, counters are no longer piled high with fresh tomatoes straight from Florida fields. Instead, the supply is low, many of the tomatoes are traveling from Mexico and it's not uncommon to see bruised or overripe stock.

"While our displays may not be as full, we're getting enough to get us through each day," said Russ Benblatt, Florida spokesman for Whole Foods, which is getting most of its tomatoes in Mexico. "We're having to look to other sources in warmer climates, which is a strange thing in Florida."

## **THE COST**

But the shortage comes with a price. What's left of the Florida tomato crop had jumped to a wholesale price of \$23.95 to \$25.95 per 25-pound box Friday. That's nearly twice the average price.

Trucking tomatoes from Mexico to Florida also is more expensive.

So far, retailers and restaurants say they are absorbing most of those costs.

Traditional Florida round tomatoes were selling at Publix on Monday for \$2.29 per pound, while plum tomatoes from Mexico were on sale for \$1.29 per pound.

"This was an unforeseen circumstance and if we can absorb the costs on our end, we want to help our customers as much as possible," said Kim Jaeger, South Florida spokeswoman for Publix, which has increased prices to consumers by less than a dime since last year.

Supply problems are likely to continue until Florida's tomato production returns to normal levels, which may not be until late March or early April.

Even those fields that growers in Homestead and Palm Beach County were able to salvage are not producing at anywhere near the normal levels. Continued cold weather is slowing the growth cycle of new tomatoes.

Florida tomato production for the period since the freeze is off about 70 percent, compared with the same period last year, said Reggie Brown, executive vice president of the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange.

"Tomatoes are relatively scarce," said Brown, whose group represents the majority of the state's tomato growers.

"You're probably looking at three or four weeks of not a lot of supply. We haven't seen anything like this in 20 years. We're just waiting for Mother Nature to give us some better weather to grow some tomatoes."

## **DROPPING**

DiMare Farms, the largest grower in Homestead, is only picking between 10 percent and 20 percent of its normal volumes, Paul DiMare said. "We're probably as light as we've ever seen," said DiMare, who only recalls a similar drop in the late 1970s after it snowed in South Florida.

Michael Borek, who lost about half the crop at his Redland farm to this year's freeze, has also watched his yields drop another 50 percent.

"Each week we're filling orders but it's getting harder and harder," Borek said. "We're just trying to keep the customers we have."

## **CHEF'S WOES**

Chef Michael Schwartz, of Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, a restaurant in Miami's Design District, is one of those customers.

While he's still getting what he needs, the tomatoes take up to a week of ripening before they're ready to serve with a burrata cheese dish or a salad. That's why Schwartz had to increase his inventory by almost 30 percent.

Schwartz's restaurant now has two rooms stocked high with nearly 80 cases of beefsteak and heirloom tomatoes. His restaurant uses 1,000 pounds of tomatoes a week, so the restaurateur wants to be ready.

"We're kind of juggling them around," Schwartz said.

"It's a big commitment of time, labor and money. But we're known for our tomatoes. If we missed one delivery, we'd be out."

The reason Burger King has already faced supply outages is because the Miami fast food chain decided not to follow the route of other retailers and restaurants that have turned to Mexico to fill the void. Burger King didn't want to take the chance because of a lack of systems to ensure the quality of its round tomatoes.

Instead, Burger King is asking for customers' understanding with signs in some restaurants that explain why a good tomato is sometimes hard to find.