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Huge Crop Of Florida Tomatoes Remains Unpicked In Field While Public Perceives A Shortage, Bronson Says

HOMESTEAD -- Acres of Florida tomatoes remain unpicked while the general public still perceives a shortage, Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson was told by growers during a tour of South Florida tomato farms today.

“I was shocked to see acre upon acre of unharvested tomatoes,” Bronson said after visiting tomato farms in Homestead. “The perception of a tomato shortage still remains in the mind of the public. As a result, consumers aren’t buying tomatoes, retail grocers and restaurants aren’t placing orders, and our growers are facing disaster because they can’t sell their crop.”

Bronson said that, while there was a short-term shortage of tomatoes immediately after the state’s destructive hurricane season, Florida’s farmers replanted and there now is an abundance of fresh tomatoes.

“Florida’s tomato farmers worked hard to get back in business following the hurricanes, but are now frustrated as their crop remains in the field because they can’t find buyers,” Bronson said. “Even with this abundant tomato supply, we’re still hearing stories that some restaurants and fast-food establishments are still limiting tomatoes or not serving them at all.”

Retail grocery prices for tomatoes, which had peaked at nearly \$4 per pound in October and November, have begun returning to more normal levels. Bronson was told by growers that they are receiving 15 to 20 cents per pound for their tomatoes.

Bronson told growers he has directed his Division of Marketing and Development to assist them in moving the current tomato crop into the marketplace.

“We want American consumers to know that Florida is back in the fresh tomato business,” Bronson said. “We encourage corporate buyers for grocery chains and restaurants to move swiftly to help satisfy consumers’ pent-up demand for this delicious and healthy product.”

Florida’s devastating hurricane season – which destroyed tomatoes in the field and delayed planting of new crops – had contributed to a short-term shortage of fresh tomatoes in much of the country. The situation was exacerbated by problems in other tomato-producing areas (heavy rains during the harvest season in California and a continuing pest problem in Mexico). As a result, many consumers saw empty tomato bins in their grocery stores or restaurant menus indicating that tomatoes were available only by special request or, in some cases, not at all.

An unprecedented four major hurricanes -- Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne -- battered Florida's farmers in August and September, leaving in their wake uprooted crops, flooded fields and a battered infrastructure. Many Florida tomato growers replanted their crops after Charley and Frances only to see them destroyed soon after by Jeanne.

"Florida's farmers have rebuilt, replanted and revived much of our state's agriculture industry," Bronson said. "This is vital not only for our state but for the entire nation, since Florida farmers produce 80 percent of this country's domestically grown vegetables during the winter months."

This report was supplemented by Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (<http://www.fl-ag.com/news/01-18-05b.htm>)