

Freeze Wiped Out Quarter of Calif. Citrus Crop

EXETER, Calif. (AP) — A week of freezing temperatures in early December wiped out nearly a quarter of California's \$2 billion citrus industry, an industry group estimated on Monday.

The group, California Citrus Mutual, said the damage was confined to the state's Central Valley, where about \$441 million in mandarin and navel oranges and lemons were lost during seven consecutive nights of freezing temperatures in early December.

Consumers are likely to see at least a slight increase in the price of oranges at the grocery store and can expect a shorter season for California citrus, the group said.

"It's a significant loss, but most of that's going to go to the grower's bottom line," said Bob Blakely, director of industry relations for California Citrus Mutual.

Temperatures fell into the low 20s during the freeze, forcing growers to turn to irrigation and wind machines to propel warm air through the fields. The cold temperatures also put other crops such as lettuce and avocado at risk.

The mandarin crop was of particular concern because the tiny fruit is thinner-skinned than other oranges, making it more susceptible to cold.

California Citrus Mutual said about 20 percent of the mandarin crop had already been harvested when the freeze set in, but about 40 percent of the remaining oranges, or \$150 million in revenue, was lost. The navel crop suffered a 30 percent loss, with the dollar value of the damage hit \$260 million, the group said. About \$24 million in lemons also were lost.

The group estimated that citrus growers spent \$49 million to protect the crop through early January.

The vast majority of California's citrus crop is consumed as fruit, not juice, so the loss will not affect juice prices, Blakely said.

The industry, additionally, is wary of prices going too high, said Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual.

Prices climbed significantly after a 2007 freeze, Nelsen said. The result was more competition from offshore citrus and a switch by consumers to other fruits.

"We don't want to lose shelf space, the consumer focus on California citrus," he said. "We don't want to lose their purchasing habits. We don't have that option to recapture all of what was lost."

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Farmers have crop insurance, although it will not likely cover all of their losses, Nelsen said.

One change consumers are likely to see is a shorter season for California oranges. The industry expects to ship them to the marketplace through mid-May, versus the traditional availability into July, Nelsen said

California's drought will not affect this year's crop, but it could be a factor for the following year, he said.

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