Start of Conn. Maple Season Stuck in Polar Vortex

PAT EATON-ROBB, Associated Press

HEBRON, Conn. (AP) — The polar vortex has some Connecticut maple syrup producers vexed.

The maple syrup season, which normally begins in this state in late January, has been delayed as colder than normal daytime temperatures the past two months have kept the sap from running in the sugar maples.

"Now the 10 day forecast has us frozen out again into next week," Mark Harran, president of the Maple Syrup Producers of Connecticut, said Tuesday. "Historically we have a six week season that ends around April 1, so, to me, any way you cut it, it's going to be a shortened season."

Ron Wenzel, 67, of Hebron didn't start tapping his 450 or so trees until this past weekend, when daytime temperatures finally reached into the 40s and 50s, allowing the sap to flow.

To produce syrup, the sugar makers need days with temperatures in the mid-40s, and nights in the mid-20s.

In February, there have been 13 days when the high temperature at Bradley International Airport didn't even reach the freezing mark, never mind 40 degrees, said William Babcock, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Wenzel and his wife, Joyce, are hoping to get a few more moderate days before Hebron's annual Maple Festival on March 8 and 9. The festival draws several thousand people to town each year, many of whom come to Wenzel's sugar shack to watch him work.

Those tours will go on, whether they are making syrup or not. And Wenzel said there will be maple syrup and candy to buy.

"This isn't our first rodeo," he said. "We have plenty left over from last year, which was our best season ever."

That season also was interrupted by a cold snap, but it was followed by weeks of perfect weather, leading to record yields, Harran said.

So there will be no supply problem, he said. In fact, because Connecticut produces only a tiny fraction of the nation's maple sugar supply, Harran said consumers would not feel the impact of any shortened season.

The state had about 70,000 tapped trees, and produced about 20,000 gallons of syrup last year.

That compared to more than 1.3 million gallons in Vermont, and millions more in Quebec, which produces more than 70 percent of the world's supply. The maple season there doesn't typically get going until later in the winter.

Bob Dubose, who has about 1,500 taps on trees at his farm in Chaplin, said the weather is more of an annoyance than anything. He said Connecticut produces a higher quality syrup that many other places, and most of his customer's want to buy a local product.

"I don't want to have to buy anyone else's syrup to meet my customer demand," he said. "But we made enough last year that I can wholesale to some other state producers to meet their needs."

The other impact of the late start, he said, could be a lighter syrup this year. The first sap has a higher sugar content, which requires less time to cook down into syrup. When there is a long season, the last sap has less sugar, requiring more boiling to get to the needed 66 percent sugar content. That makes that syrup darker and gives it a stronger flavor, Harran said.

But it's still too early to say if the weather will have any impact at all on syrup production, said Timothy Perkins, the director of the University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center.

"When it's cold, things are not happening. They get concerned, obviously," he said. "It will get warm. Too hot is far worse than too cold."

Technology also has muted the impact of the weather. Harran notes that many sugar makers now use vacuum systems and better taps that don't close up as quickly, allowing them to get more sap in the same amount of time.

But while most people are rooting for an early spring, the sugar makers say they are hoping it stays cold enough into mid-April to keep this year's sap flowing just a bit longer.

"If I could tell you how good this season's going to be, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here making maple syrup," said Wenzel. "I'd be at Foxwoods (casino)"

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Associated Press writer Wilson Ring in Vermont contributed to this story

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