

Local Farmers Dodge Mother Nature's Wrath

While Hurricane Irma caused significant destruction throughout Florida, it did little to harm tri-county agriculture.

By **MICHAEL SALERNO**
Daily Sun Staff Writer

Farmers' outlooks appeared dire after the storm.

State leaders estimated Hurricane Irma did more than \$760 million in damage to Florida's citrus crop, according to a Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services report issued Wednesday.

Officials are calling it a statewide crisis — a catastrophic blow to an

already crippled industry.

The Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association reported that Irma took out 70 percent of the state's orange crop. Many South Florida growers found green, unripe oranges knocked onto the ground from the storm's winds. Some trees were underwater because of flooding.

"After touring (citrus) groves on foot and by air, it's clear that our signature crop has suffered serious and devastating losses from Hurricane

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Huey Reed of Reed Groves cuts a grapefruit from his grove. The Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association said Irma took out 70 percent of the state's orange crop.

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Irma," Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam said.

Irma hit the citrus industry hardest out of all sectors of Florida's agriculture, which suffered more than \$2.5 billion in damages overall, he said.

On Sept. 18, Putnam joined U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, Sen. Marco Rubio and Rep. Thomas Rooney on an aerial tour of Irma's damage to citrus groves and farms. The devastation they surveyed included farms where groves were underwater and trees were ripped out of the ground.

In contrast, Weirsdale grower Huey Reed surveyed rows of trees with his fruits mostly intact. Irma blew down fewer than 10 percent of the oranges on his trees.

Tri-county fruit and vegetable growers escaped serious damage to their crops, even as farmers in South Florida reported losing nearly everything because of the storm.

Not a drop of standing water was found when Reed surveyed his groves.

Reed's family and employees spent the days following Irma clearing debris from the groves. They left the dropped fruit on the ground.

Despite losing some fruit and a few young mandarin orange trees he planted about a year ago, he was optimistic about the season.

"We've got a great crop," Reed said. "Especially the grapefruit."

But, with fewer oranges statewide, Reed anticipates a spike in orange juice prices.

He isn't alone.

Orange juice prices jumped by about 30 cents in the last month to \$1.586 per pound on the ICE Futures Exchange, according to data from NASDAQ.

Meanwhile, growers remain hopeful that federal assistance may provide some needed relief. After the devastating 2004 hurricane season, FEMA stepped in to help the state's staple industry recover.

Florida Citrus Mutual, an agricultural cooperative association for the state's citrus growers, sent growers a survey asking them to estimate damages from Irma. Specifically, growers were



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Green grapefruit hang on the trees in Reed Groves in Weirsdale. Tri-county fruit and vegetable growers escaped serious damage to their crops.

asked to provide total fruit loss, wind damage and acreage in standing water.

After the storm, U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, the Republican representing Florida's 16th District, pushed Congress to take action on the Emergency Citrus Disease Response Act, a bill he co-sponsored that would provide tax incentives for growers who can't afford to replace lost citrus trees.

Last week, House Ways and Means Chairman Kevin Brady, R-Texas, said Buchanan's proposal would be included in an aid package Congress is expected to take up this month.

The bill was designed to help citrus growers affected by citrus greening, an incurable bacterial disease that infects citrus trees and their fruit. But crop losses from Irma intensified the need for the bill, he said.

"Florida farmers are hurting and they need our help," Buchanan said in a statement. "This bill will go a long way toward protecting the livelihoods of so many who have seen their world turned upside down by Irma."

An earlier version of Buchanan's bill passed the House last year, but died in the Senate.

While oranges appeared to suffer the brunt of Irma's damages, it was far from the only crop farmers were concerned about.

Florida's agriculture department reported state-wide damages of more than

\$750,816,600

Total losses in Florida's citrus industry that resulted from Hurricane Irma.

Source: Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

\$624 million to ornamental plants, more than \$237 million to beef cattle and more than \$180 million in fruits and vegetables other than citrus.

Losses of up to 30 percent were expected for some major winter crops such as tomatoes and strawberries, the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association estimated.

A grower in St. Johns County reported losing nearly 200 acres of Asian vegetable crops, said Bonnie Cook Wells, a commercial agriculture agent with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension.

The picture appeared far rosier in the tri-county area, despite some damage.

Maria Tracy, co-owner of Heather Oaks Farm in Lady Lake, found Irma knocked grapes off the vines on the farm she runs with her husband, Bob.

She also thinks the storm may have upset her chickens' egg-laying schedule.

But Tracy counted her blessings, knowing her farm didn't suffer losses as heavy as her South Florida peers.

"I was honestly surprised the leaves are still on the peach trees and blueberry bushes," she said. "We had no damage to the barn and no chicken losses."