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Jobs lost due to Easter freeze
Higher prices for peaches just one element of 'substantial loss'

Published: Monday, June 4, 2007 - 2:00 am
Updated: Monday, June 4, 2007 - 12:13 pm

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While consumers can expect to pay \$1.50 to \$2 a pound for South Carolina peaches, losses from the Easter freeze are rippling through the state, experts say, and they're substantial.

Ninety percent crop loss means growers, local and migrant laborers, suppliers of farm chemicals, fertilizers and equipment, small businesses that sell food and clothing to workers and roadside stands where the South Carolina peach attracts tourists all take a hit.

"It's a very substantial loss," said Dr. Desmond Layne, professor of horticulture and state peach specialist at Clemson University.

The peach industry employs more than 2,000 local and immigrant workers, said Julie Huffman, spokeswoman for the South Carolina Peach Council.

Advertisement Because this was considered an act of God, given U.S. regulations, many of the migrant workers had to return to their home country without work, she said.

Peaches and fireworks draw tourists to roadside markets along interstates, Layne said. Tourists expect "delicious fruit," and if disappointed, may not return.

California peaches are available, but they may have been picked a week or so earlier, traveled a long distance, spent time in a distribution center and finally made it to a store, he said.

They may look like a peach, but because of their travels, when you bite into one, you could be disappointed.


Peaches may be the primary crop for large commercial producers. Eighty percent of those peaches usually are exported to major cities up the East Coast, Layne said.

Gov. Mark Sanford expects to hear soon whether the state will receive a disaster designation from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said his spokesman, Joel Sawyer.

This could mean low-interest loans and other assistance to growers.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R.-SC, plans to sponsor a meeting today between the USDA and Upstate farmers at Gramling Farms to talk about how crop-loss payments are calculated.

There has to be a disaster declaration in order to get crop loss payments, Layne said. Money needs to be available, and claims are based on a documented loss, which someone has to assess.

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That's easy if there's no fruit on the tree, but if fruit on a tree is damaged and not marketable, it's difficult to assess, Layne said.

Not all growers have crop insurance, and it doesn't pay for everything, he said.
