

'A challenging year:' Late spring freeze devastates Pa fruit farms as officials seek aid

<https://wjactv.com/news/local/a-challenging-year-late-spring-freeze-devastates-pa-fruit-farms-as-officials-seek-aid-agriculture-pennsylvania-farmers-crop-crops-weather-financial-assistance->

By: Gary Sinderson

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PENNSYLVANIA (WJAC) — State officials are continuing to follow the devastating impact that this year's late spring freeze had on Pennsylvania fruit farmers.

For some farmers, it practically wiped out their crop.

Now, work is underway to get the farmers financial help.

"It does have a seed in it; it does have a seed. But it's just not growing."

At the Way Fruit Farm in Centre County, co-owner Jason Coopey showed Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding the impact of the April freeze on what's left of his apple orchid.

"These trees should be full of hundreds of apples. This is normally our 'you-pick' orchard. So, it's going to be a challenging year."

In the new state budget, ten million dollars was allocated for freeze assistance disaster grants. But much more is needed, as the state is asking for federal emergency funding for the farmers.

"Those dollars will not replace the lost apples, cherries or peaches. And it won't help our processors and packers unfortunately. But it will help farmers weather this difficult season."

It's anticipated that this difficult season will have a sizeable ripple effect.

"The effects of this historic freeze will be felt by the entire food system. Everyone that relies on Pennsylvania grown fruit to feed families and serve their customers."

The Way Fruit Farm dates back to 1826, celebrating two hundred years in business. Now, they're asking for support for one of Pennsylvania's most vital industries.

"Just keep supporting farms like ours. Even if it's not us, please go out and support local farmers because that's the only way we are going to keep them strong."

Pennsylvania fruit growers face catastrophic losses after historic spring freeze

<https://www.psu.edu/news/agricultural-sciences/story/pennsylvania-fruit-growers-face-catastrophic-losses-after-historic>

By: Alexandra McLaughlin

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — At a century-old farm in Franklin County, more than 400 young plum trees were expected to produce their first commercial crop this year. The grower had spent four years expanding his orchard for a specialty buyer who promised to purchase every plum he could grow.

Then came the April freeze.

In a single night, the crop was gone, according to Daniel Weber, horticulture educator on Penn State Extension's commercial tree fruit team, who is helping the grower handle the challenge.

Across Pennsylvania, fruit growers are facing catastrophic losses after repeated swings between warm spring temperatures and hard freezes damaged crops already pushed into bloom.

Current estimates suggest losses of 70% to 90% across many fruit crops, according to Weber, who said the damage is unlike anything many growers have seen in their lifetimes.

Early estimates from the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture place losses to Pennsylvania's specialty crop industry between \$150 million and \$200 million.

Pennsylvania is one of the nation's leading producers of apples, peaches, grapes, cherries and strawberries, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Based on observations from extension educators submitted to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, estimated losses range from 70% to 90% for apples; 90% to 100% for peaches, nectarines and apricots; 60% to 80% for European pears; and as high as 95% to 100% for cherries and plums. Even surviving fruit may have frost damage severe enough to reduce its commercial value.

Beyond fruit crops, the freeze also damaged nursery operations, Christmas tree farms and vegetable production.

As growers assess the damage, Penn State Extension educators are providing on-farm consultations, management guidance and crop status reporting to help orchards navigate an unprecedented season.

Why is this so devastating?

At Ridgetop Orchards in Bedford County, co-owner Mark Boyer said he cannot find a single cherry or peach remaining across roughly 20 acres of cherries and 17 acres of peaches.

Apple losses across the orchard's 450 acres vary by variety, but many surviving apples contain dead seeds likely to cause the fruit to drop later this season.

Boyer described the panic, anxiety and grief caused by the freeze.

“One of the things people get wrong all the time is they say, ‘Well, the trees will bloom again, right?’” Boyer said. “Well, that’s next year.”

Once fruit trees bloom, those flowers represent the entire season’s crop.

Weber said the damage can be difficult for the public to grasp because the freezes were brief and visually unremarkable.

“It’s not like a hurricane, flood or blizzard,” Weber said. “It got cold for a couple hours.”

But temperatures of 29 degrees or lower for even 30 minutes can destroy roughly 10% of a crop, with losses increasing as the cold persists.

Donald Seifrit, tree-fruit extension educator in Berks County, said unusual spring weather pushed crops such as peaches and apples into vulnerable bloom stages at nearly the same time.

Role of Penn State Extension

Penn State Extension educators are helping orchards navigate difficult financial and management decisions following the freeze.

“Apple growers are in a bind and are faced with no easy answers,” Weber said.

Growers must decide whether surviving fruit is worth the cost of pesticides and harvest labor, whether damaged crops should be diverted to juice production, and how to protect tree health heading into next season.

“All those management decisions cost money,” Weber said. “Growers are asking, ‘How much is too much to spend if I’m not going to make a single dollar off the crop?’”

Extension educators also are documenting crop losses through weekly phenology reports shared with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and federal officials as the state seeks disaster assistance. In a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins, Gov. Josh Shapiro urged the federal government to expedite crop insurance payments and damage assessments.

Extension also is helping growers prepare for customer questions as orchards and farm markets brace for limited local fruit this season. A May 27 webinar, “After the Freeze: Navigating Tough Customer Questions,” focused on communicating crop losses and pricing concerns with customers.

Impact on small growers

The freeze may be especially devastating for small and new growers. Weber said many newer orchards in central Pennsylvania are operated by Amish and Mennonite growers who often avoid government assistance programs, leaving farms and small local markets especially vulnerable in a year with little or no crop.

“For a lot of these smaller markets, this may just be too hard of a year,” Weber said. “I’m worried that some of them may not come back.”

One Franklin County grower who Weber works with had expected his peaches and plums to produce their first crop this season.

“He’s invested all of his own personal money into this,” Weber said. “He built his own small farm stand for on-site sales, and it’s not going to have anything in it.”

Ripple effects

Penn State experts say the impacts extend far beyond orchards.

“This event will impact the processors, packers and wholesalers who support these farms,” said Miranda Harple, interim director of the Center for Plant Excellence housed at Penn State Extension.

Weber said reduced crop production will affect chemical suppliers, equipment dealers, seasonal labor and tourism tied to orchards and fall festivals.

Growers also are concerned about longstanding supply contracts.

“How are they going to fulfill their contracts, and is the company they had the contract with understanding enough to give them a pass this year?” Weber said.

The effects may eventually reach consumers as well. Freeze damage stretched from Virginia through New York, affecting much of the eastern fruit-growing region.

“With several of those states getting severely damaged, that’s going to have knock-on effects at the grocery store,” Seifrit said.

Personal toll

For Harple, the freeze damage is both professional and personal. Her family owns a small apple orchard in Adams County as first-generation growers.

“In a room full of growers, we turn to those who have mentored us, and I have a lot of respect for what they carry and what they have taught us,” she said. “The freeze hit all of us. The initial counts were heartbreaking.”

Still, she said the experience has reinforced the resilience of Pennsylvania’s agricultural community.

“Farmers know how to look forward, and it is a lead worth following,” Harple said. “That is just what this community does.”

Harple said one of the most important steps growers can take now is to document their losses and communicate with crop insurance agents and local Farm Service Agency offices as disaster relief programs develop.

“We can help growers understand resources available and how to navigate the systems that exist already for impacted industries,” she said. “We get accurate information out as quickly as we can through channels that growers trust. The Center for Plant Excellence has a unique vantage point across plant industries that don’t always sit at the same table.”

Boyer also said Penn State Extension’s mental health resources are especially important as farmers face shrinking returns and rising costs across agriculture.

Advice to the public

Carla Snyder, associate state program leader for energy, business and community vitality with Penn State Extension, encouraged residents to support local farmers markets, roadside stands and agritourism destinations.

“Your support plays a vital role in sustaining the farms and agricultural traditions that are central to the commonwealth’s identity,” Snyder said.

Harple also encouraged people to show up.

“Go to your local farm stand, go to u-pick even if the selection is smaller than usual, and keep the relationships with local farms,” Harple said. “Those relationships are exactly what gets operations through a tough year.”