



Fresh market tomato harvest impacted by poor weather

Issue Date: November 1, 2006

By Christine Souza
Assistant Editor

California growers of fresh market tomatoes say sweltering July temperatures and a wet spring resulted in low production and a lack of supply around the nation.

"The fresh market industry has done pretty well for the last four years, but this year definitely won't be remembered as a banner year. It will be remembered for its super high temperatures," said Scott Stoddard, University of California Cooperative Extension vegetable crops farm advisor for Merced and Madera counties. "But I don't think this year is a total loss. Everyone has got challenges every year and it is always a challenge to be a tomato grower."

Growers experienced problems with planting when a wet spring damaged tomato transplants. Weeks later, the extreme heat caused challenges to pollination such as tomato blooms dropping off of the plants.

"These fields were essentially trying to pollinate at the time and they couldn't, so we got this big hole in production," Stoddard said. "Any time you have temperatures above 100 degrees for an extended period of time, your blossoms are going to fall off and the pollen isn't going to be viable. Even though there were tomato fields, there were no tomatoes to harvest because farmers were waiting for the crop to mature."

Dean Janssen, general manager of Ace Tomato, a grower, packer and shipper in Manteca, confirmed that trouble really began during July heat wave.

"Our supplies are light because of the extreme heat that we had in July. During planting, we had a lot of transplants that died from the heat as well as some bloom drop. When it gets so hot, the plant drops its bloom and later resets the bloom," Janssen said.

As a result, Janssen said, tomato quality took a hit to some extent.

"The extreme heat causes misshapen tomatoes. In some cases the heat causes a re-growth out of the blossom end so tomatoes are misshapen but actually the taste of the tomatoes shouldn't be affected," Janssen said. "(This lack of production) doesn't happen very often and actually is probably the first time we've had production that light in September as long as I've been involved and that is since the early 1980s."



The nation's supply of fresh tomatoes was further impacted by weather events that caused lower production for farmers in Florida and Mexico.

"We don't think our supplies will take care of the whole country because there are other areas that typically produce tomatoes during this time of the year, but their supplies are down because of rains and hurricanes," Janssen said.

For fresh tomato growers in the Central Valley, harvest tapered off at the end of October when the weather became cooler with less sunlight. Stoddard is unsure what impact the July heat will have on the year's total fresh tomato production.

"Although I expect the production of fresh market tomatoes to be down, the impact related to the weather should be minor since our fields are spread out over a longer planting window," Stoddard said. "We'll start in late February/March and continue planting through early August. That is five months of planting so the total impact of the weather is a little less because you don't have as many acres coming in all at the same time."

In the state's fresh tomato growing region in Southern California, growers and marketers report things are moving along smoothly. Bill Wilber, president of Oceanside Produce, which handles marketing and sales for fresh tomato growers, said harvest should continue through mid-November.

"This summer when we had the extreme heat it impacted the tomatoes, but right now we are doing OK. We are in pretty good control of harvest and we are not having the problems the guys in Northern California are having as far as moving our crop," Wilber said. "We are still harvesting and quality is very, very good. When the guys up there saw a lot of heat and had tremendous bloom drop, we were in pretty good harvest numbers so we are in a different position."

California growers expect to harvest 10,300 acres of fresh tomatoes during the October-December period, 6 percent below a year ago, according to information provided by the California field office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service. California's July heat shortened the transplanting season resulting in less acreage. Nationally, fresh market acreage for fall harvest is forecast at 22,100 acres, down 2 percent from 2005 and 4 percent below 2004. About 94 percent of the harvest is complete for fresh market tomatoes. During October through December, growers usually harvest about 11,000 acres.

"There are those who are making money and those who aren't making money, but you need far less production to make money when the market is as high as it is so all of the growers will get some return," Janssen said.

(Christine Souza is a reporter for Ag Alert. She may be contacted at csouza@cfbf.com.)

Permission for use is granted, however, credit must be made to the California Farm Bureau Federation when reprinting this item.

RSS

Top