



## Olive growers dealt a losing hand

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By Kathy Coatney

The full impact of the February freeze on Northern California's 2006 olive crop wasn't revealed until early June, after the bloom. Now olive growers realize that the damage was extensive-to both trees and bloom.

"I think that we can reasonably say that the Manzanillos, in Tehama County anyway, are pretty much shot," said Cody McCoy, field representative for Bell Carter Foods in Corning.

Statewide it looks to be a short crop as well, McCoy continued, explaining, "The south had a real heavy crop last year, and naturally they would come back with a shorter crop this year. And then they've also been hampered somewhat by those cold temperatures and the wet rains that we had through the springtime."

Adin Hester of the Olive Growers Council in Visalia agreed that the statewide olive crop is very light this year. "Some groves have one or two trees with some olives and other groves have nothing. One grower told me he's never seen anything like this in the 46 years he's been growing olives."

Hester explained that the warm January brought the olive trees out of dormancy, and then it turned cold in February and March. Many of the trees in Glenn and Tehama counties lost blossoms to frost. In the south it rained at bloom time and washed off the pollen.

"If it had just been a normal cold, dismal year all through that time the trees probably wouldn't have suffered so much," said Chris Henderson, general manager of Genoa Farms in Tehama County.

Henderson reported considerable tree damage. "The orchard looks like a blow torch came over it. We have anything from just loss of crop with minimal tree damage to severe tree damage."

Chip McCoy, a Manzanillo grower and owner of McCoy Orchards in Corning, estimates his crop loss at about 90 percent. "I'll never be able to put a picker in the field," he said. "The actual freeze damage, the damage to the trees wasn't as severe as some other places."



Olive set is light this year because of adverse weather conditions at bloom time.

McCoy said this isn't the first time that he has sustained freeze damage. In the early 1990s, freeze damage was so severe, he had to cut all his trees to stumps and start over.

"I don't know what the difference is outside of it seems to be colder in one area than another area," he said. "And this time I'll say I just kind of lucked out because it didn't kill my trees down to the ground level."

Henderson doesn't anticipate replacing trees. Instead, he said he will initiate a several-year process of pruning the dead wood and the olive knot that results from the freeze damage to reestablish the trees.

"We obviously can't afford to prune all of this out. I don't know if that's even the right thing to do at this stage, or if it's better to let the tree start slowly growing out of it, and then manicure it back as time goes on," Henderson said.

Tehama County was hit harder by the freeze than neighboring Glenn County.

"You can see the physical damage out in the trees in Tehama County with leaf loss, and split bark, and defoliation," Chip McCoy said.

While Glenn County doesn't have the obvious physical damage, it appears the bloom has been impacted.

"I've heard some guys already talking that they had a pretty good bloom, but now they're wondering where in the heck all the olives are. Nothing seems to be growing, the flowers didn't seem to get pollinated," Chip McCoy said.

He noted that Sevillano orchards also experienced freeze damage. While the Sevillanos don't have the split branches and the knot like the Manzanillos, it's still too early to tell just how the Sevillano crop will shake out, he said.

Bill Krueger, University of California Cooperative Extension farm advisor in Glenn County, said, "I've really only seen one orchard that I think is going to have a decent crop."

This was expected to be a big year for the Northern California olive crop because there was a light crop last year. "I'd be willing to say that isn't gonna happen, and that this will be a light year," Krueger said.

With an extremely short crop, some growers may decide not to spray for the olive fruit fly.

Chip McCoy said he is in a "wait and see mode" on whether to spray for the pest this year.

"If there are no olives, I wouldn't think I'd need to spray. But if there are some, I'll probably just do some spot spraying on trees where I do see some," he said. "If we get really hot like we did last summer, I probably won't even do anything."

The 2006 olive crop is now projected at about 45,000 tons statewide. That's down from 128,000 tons last year, Cody McCoy said. Coming into this crop year, Bell Carter is carrying in about 91,000 tons on sales of 97,000 tons. A short crop will reduce the inventory levels.

"To meet our sales needs for next year, we don't need that big of a crop," Cody McCoy said. "We could have only 10,000 or 20,000 tons of carry-in for next year. Any grower of any commodity, the only time he can make money is when he's got a big crop and big price. Well, the only time you ever have a big crop and big price is when there are low inventories.

"Even though it's a disaster for the growers on the short term, long term it may help correct the market and lead to some better years here in the future. Let's cross our fingers and hope that that's the case. We need it."

Hester said he fears market share loss to foreign suppliers—a loss that would be difficult to recover. He said three new countries are now exporting olives to the United States: Argentina, Egypt and Turkey.

He said he is hoping Congress will fund some type of relief for olive growers, and more than the low-interest loans that are currently available. He said California growers have had only one good year, 2001, out of the last six.

*(Kathy Coatney is a reporter in Corning. She may be contacted at [zooker@theskybeam.com](mailto:zooker@theskybeam.com).)*

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