Perfect storm takes toll on SW Fla. crops
High temperatures, winds, rainfall hurt farmers, cost consumers

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Since November, farmers have been locked in a losing battle with our baffling weather. High temperatures, high winds and high rainfall totals have taken their toll, and consumers are just starting to see the impact.

Diminished harvests of tomatoes, peppers, squash and strawberries are causing losses for growers and an increase in produce prices for consumers.

On a chilly morning Thursday at a farmers market under the Caloosahatchee Bridge, Michael Wallace, owner of Pine Island Botanicals in Bokeelia, gestured toward his stack of papayas. In previous years, that stack would take up most of the table. Today he had five.

“I lost 2,000 pounds of papaya,” Wallace said. “I lost a fair amount of money this year.”

That money would have come from his tomatoes, peppers and yellow squash crops. “I lost all of my calabaza squash,” Wallace said. “There are just so many things we lost. After the one day I had 6 inches of rain, my field of salad greens was under three inches of water. They don’t swim well.”

The wet January also affected his hydroponically grown crops. “I lost about 30 percent of that due to bacteria from the standing water,” he said.

Wallace isn’t alone. A few stalls away, Horace Brittain of Brittain Farms in Alva was standing over a bin of tomatoes. “It started in November,” Brittain said. “And then it went on to December and January. You can move the water, but you can only move so much of it.”

He held out a tomato, which appeared to be perfectly ripe and ready to eat but was topped with long splits and cracks. “When it rains, the tomatoes crack at the stem end,” Wallace said, his worn fingers tracing the trails along the top. “This is throwaway. But I’m putting them in the bag and selling them for $2. That’s a deal with the current price of tomatoes.”

Brittain owns 40 acres but is farming only 18 this year. “The rain affected all of it. I lost 20 to 30 percent of my last two plantings.”

That loss is reflected in the price of his produce. “Everything is up,” Brittain said. “People are shocked. Prices are the highest I’ve seen in my 58 years.”

‘Growing but not producing’

“It started in the fall,” said Gene McAvoy, county extension agent for Hendry County. “We had an unusually hot, wet fall. That caused a lot of different fungal and bacterial diseases. Some of the commercial growers I work with had yields of 50 percent less because they had to throw so much away.”

The high temperatures and rain that continued past the rainy season meant humidity, which affected pollination of peppers, corn and tomatoes. “A lot of the tomatoes were puffy,” McAvoy said about the early harvests. “When you cut them open there was nothing inside the tomatoes. Or the peppers.”
Sweet corn, which depends on wind pollination, was affected as well. “You ended up with a dry bud. The tip was all dried out and there was a zipper of two or three rows that never formed. Some of my growers in Clewiston were throwing out half of their corn.”

Then came January. “It was wetter than summer,” McAvoy said. Not only did fields flood, but as the soil remained damp, fungal and bacterial diseases set in. “We had people who lost entire fields of cabbage and lettuce when the heads rotted from disease.”

For Alfie Oakes, owner of Oakes Farms in Collier County, wind caused the most damage. “The winds crushed us,” Oakes said. “The back-to-back rains didn’t help.” Oakes Farms has invested in water management systems on all of its farms, but even that wasn’t enough.

“If you can’t get the plant dried out, the bacteria grows,” he said, adding that they responded by implementing a more diligent fungicide application program.

“Some of the crops are more hardy and can take the wind,” Oakes said. “We can harvest about 25 percent of the volume we planted, the other crops maybe 10 percent. What we are harvesting has a lot of wind scar so 80 percent of that 25 percent we harvested is number two product and has to be sold for less money.”

For TJ Cannamela, owner of Buckingham Farms in Buckingham, pinpointing why he has very little to harvest is proving difficult. “Things are growing but not producing,” Cannamela said. “Our strawberry plants are beautiful, but we have no berries.”

The 10,000 strawberry plants planted over 3 acres should be in full harvest right now. “We had a late start to the year because of the heat in December,” Cannamela said. “The rain doesn’t affect us as much except it washes the nutrients out of the soil and we have to fertilize more.”

If he did a sales report now, it wouldn’t show more than $500, Cannamela said. “It’s the first year we will lose money on strawberries. A lot of money.”

It’s that loss of income that concerns McAvoy.

The produce predicament has not gone unnoticed. At least 23 crops are behind last year’s production, Agriculture Commissioner Adam H. Putnam said in an email. “We’re currently in communication with the South Florida Management District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others to monitor the situation and provide support to the impacted communities as needed.”

With produce farmers facing little to no harvests and putting their hopes into the rest of the season, more than reassurance is needed, especially if conditions do not improve.

“It could take a year to recover,” McAvoy said. “For every dollar a farmer loses, he has to sell $10 to make it up. We had some farmers who didn’t get out of debt after the hurricanes for four to five years. It takes a while.”

Wallace isn’t just worried about this season, but the summer season as well. “Last year, mangoes were setting fruit the beginning of January,” he said. “I have two out of 300 trees that flowered, and only one has set fruit.” A lot of the trees have new growth, a sign that they are putting more energy into growing and less into producing fruit.

“I know people out on Pine Island who have 300 to 400 trees and not a single bloom on them. People are just writing off their crops this year. It’s not good at all.”

Alfie Oakes, of Oakes Farms in Immokalee, walks through a crop of squash that was almost completely devastated by recent flooding and high winds.