Donna, Texas-Area Citrus Growers Monitor Low Temperatures
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DONNA, Texas--When the mercury plunges and the wind starts to bite, South Texas citrus growers can bundle themselves up against the cold but are almost powerless to protect their livelihoods.

"There's really not a whole lot you can do," said Jimmie Steidinger, who raises grapefruit and oranges on 180 acres in this small town. "We just hope the Lord up there gives us a break."

With 65 percent of their $75 million crop not yet harvested and a frigid winter predicted, Lower Rio Grande Valley citrus growers are not relying just on divine intervention -- they're closely tracking the weather.

They're hoping to minimize the kind of damage wreaked by the freeze of 1989, which not only destroyed that year's crop, but also wiped out the citrus groves in the Valley.

The '89 freeze, when temperatures plummeted to well below freezing for about four days, is embedded in Steidinger's memory. The leaves on his grapefruit trees shriveled and fell; the tree trunks cracked.

"Crispy," Steidinger said, shaking his head. "If someone was walking through those leaves, it sounded like a shotgun was going off out there."

That year, the citrus industry, weakened by a less severe freeze in 1983, suffered about $47 million in damages. The Valley's economy groaned with the loss of thousands of jobs.

It took several years to recover.

Fruit packer Gracie Vaquera lost her seasonal job, which typically lasts eight or nine months, and instead collected unemployment. "(Citrus) is our lifeline. We hope and pray that it won't freeze," she said.

Frank Davis, president of Pittman and Davis in Harlingen, said a second packing plant developed in Florida after the 1983 freeze was the saving grace that kept the gift-fruit company afloat.

"We operated almost exclusively out of the Florida building," he said. "Now, the Valley's industry has come back, so we're shipping half and half."

Still, with only about 35,000 acres in production, the Valley's citrus industry never has completely rebounded to the 69,000 acres it claimed

before the 1983 freeze. That milder freeze bit a $500 million chunk out of the industry over the course of years.

It also took a toll on Steidinger.

When that freeze hit, he hadn't insured his citrus trees or his crop. Though he was able to prune back many of his trees to the trunk to save them -- and they quickly recovered -- he nonetheless suffered a $200,000 loss.

He and his wife, Barbara Steidinger, lived on their savings for a couple of years.

"Who needs to go to Las Vegas?" asked Barbara Steidinger, who faithfully keeps her husband's books. "You can just farm."

Citrus indeed may be a gamble, and the Steidingers are addicts. Barbara Steidinger drives a sport utility vehicle with Texas grapefruit plates that read "BUYIT." She also has entertained President-elect George W. Bush with grapefruit pie.

"He loved it," she boasted.

But that single-mindedness has a flip side. After Jimmie Steidinger struggled through the 1983 freeze, he began insuring his trees. Yet, he still lost about $240,000 in 1989.

"You can't predict it," he said. "It's like an old-timer told me, he said, 'Every freeze is different.' So there's not too much you can do."

Taking that fact of farming life in stride, Steidinger has made the proverbial lemonade out of his sour experience with citrus. After the 1983 freeze, he replanted his groves -- formerly home to Ruby Sweets -- with a newer, redder, sweeter variety of grapefruit called Rio Star. It turned out to be the right decision.

Industry experts credit the popularity of the mild fruit -- the product of a quarter-century of genetic research -- with reviving the Rio Grande Valley citrus industry.

Dwayne Bair, president of the Edinburg Citrus Association, a cooperative of about 165 citrus growers, said resourceful growers like Steidinger are the ones who pull the industry through periodic freezes.

"There's not much you can do except insure your crop," he said. "If you're going to be worried about a freeze, you shouldn't be in the citrus business."

If a freeze hits, a grower has pitifully few options, Bair said. Florida and California may be able to use heat blocks, giant fans or helicopters to envelop their groves in warm air, but wind makes that impossible in the Valley.

Some growers use microjets to spray a dome of water over each tree before the freeze starts. The water insulates the tree from the

freezing temperatures.

But the technique is expensive and subject to an unpredictable Valley water supply. If the water is shut off before the freeze is over, it will cause even more damage to the crops, Bair said.

Other growers may try to anticipate the freeze, pick as much fruit as they can and dump it on the fresh fruit market.

"But you can only sell so much fruit," Bair said. "Otherwise, it just sits there and rots. The market's still subject to supply and demand."

Fruit marketers know that after a tree-killing freeze, it will take about four years to get the region back into commercial production, said Bob Thornton, executive vice president of TexaSweet Citrus Marketing Inc.

"We just try to keep our name in front of the trade," he said.

"We don't want them to forget about us."

Growers say they would like to avoid that kind of damage control. They are becoming more savvy about predicting weather, Bair said.

Describing the freeze of 1962, he said: "I was on a tractor in my shirt sleeves that morning, and at 10 a.m., it got cool, so I got a coat. At noon, I got a heavier coat, and that afternoon, we emptied the water out of the radiators and blocks in our tractors. By 5 p.m., it was frozen solid. That's how we knew it was a freeze."

Even as recently as 1989, Bair, a pilot, said he was regarded locally as somewhat of a prophet when he second-guessed TV meteorologists -- choosing instead to get his forecasts from the area's flight services station.

Now, though they still use the same weather indicators -- the jet stream's path, the movement of pressure systems and temperature predictions -- citrus experts will use the Internet.

"We did have a satellite dish on the roof, but now we have the Internet," Bair said. "We do have better forecasting nowadays.

We don't have to wait to read it in the paper."

And if growers can ease through this winter season, they expect the weather, dipping and swaying but never lingering below freezing, may actually produce a plumper, redder crop.

"When it gets cold and wet, it colors and sizes the fruit," Steidinger said. "With warmer weather, it has a hard time coloring the fruit."