

MEXICO FREEZE: CULICAN UPDATE

On Wednesday February 9th 2011, FreshPoint/Sysco Quality Assurance traveled to Culiacan Sinaloa Mexico to visit and view the impact the recent freezing temperatures had in the growing region and surrounding areas. Initial assessments after the freeze had outlined an event not seen in the region since 1957.

Produce endured low temperatures on February 3rd and 4th for a period 1 ½ to 6 hours in length at anywhere from 22 to 28 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures were cold enough to impact all open field (85 to 99% loss), shade house (60 to 80% loss), and green house (10 to 30% loss) grown product in Mexico.

The mass of cold air cut a swath from Mexicali to the Nogales Border down into Mazatlan and portions of Baja California San Quintin.

At the time of the freeze production in the area was in full swing from Hermosillo in the North and down through La Cruz Sinaloa along the highway 15 Corridor of Mexico. About 80% of Mexico's production has been affected. It has been reported that in Sinaloa alone, 714,000 hectares (1.7 million acres) were affected by the freezing temperatures. An Area covering approximately the size of the States of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

In addition to the loss of vegetables, tomato, and corn crops; 200,000 to 300,000 farm workers have also been affected by the frost. The mass migration south of unemployed agricultural laborers will begin between mid to late February as production slows in the region. Mexico's President Felipe Calderon also visited Culiacan on February 11th, assessing the damage and pledging support in the form of seed vouchers and emergency aid.

Following is a summary of FreshPoint/Sysco Quality Assurance's visit to Culiacan Sinaloa.

Tomatoes:

Open field tomato plantings were damaged with plants a total loss in most cases. Some product was salvaged through prompt harvest of open field product, however quality will be suspect. Shade house tomatoes also experienced damage to the tops of the plants resulting in loss of new crop. Fruit from the lower portions of plants will be available for 2 to possibly 3 weeks. Followed by 3 to 4 weeks of low production volume as growers prune and retrain vines to set new fruit. In all there will be a period of 4 to 6 weeks of uncertain volumes and quality from Mexico. For Romas be advised there will be potential for wide disparity in quality as Mexico tries to salvage and re focus crop. For Grape tomatoes, the damage to this crop was very extensive. Some plantings were still being harvested in small pockets where fruit had survived or was minimally damaged; quality will be a primary concern for these stands. Additional production areas are four weeks away from initial volumes. Cherry tomatoes appear to have fared slightly better

than originally thought. There is life in some stands versus initial reports of total losses. Production will still be affected as plants are rehabilitated. Time will tell if new crops can be brought to speed in these stands quick enough.





Squash:

As for other vegetables grown in Mexico, at the time of the frost, open field squash, bean, cucumbers, egg plant, and bell peppers were lost. Most have been lost for the season, although some growers began a close study of their open field crops such as bell peppers to try and stimulate foliage using amino acids, growth regulators, fertilizers, and water. The damage for the industries squash production was severe, although there are some small plantings that survived the cold temperatures. These have been reported in and around Guaymas area of Sonora along the Coast south of Hermosillo. For the balance of the industry overall it will take approximately 45 to 60 days until new supplies begin. Drops in available product will most likely go down to 2 to 5 % of normal for the industry; weather permitting.

Bell Peppers:

For open field green bell pepper, losses are significant and similar to squash. As previously mentioned some growers are removing foliage and cutting fruit off in hopes of regenerating a crop in 6 to 8 weeks. Initial observations are not very promising and most likely will lead to growers having to disk their open field crop. Moving forward Green Bell peppers will become extremely tight and limited, especially in larger sizes by the first and second week of March. Shade house colored bells fared better although there are examples where growers lost the tops of their indoor plants due to the extreme cold weather. Colored bells that did survive indoors were being cut green in some of the Ranches I visited to capture some of the green bell gap created by the cold. By cutting colored bells early to fill in the gap from open field losses there will potentially also be a gap for colored bells as well.





Cucumbers:

The cucumbers of the area I visited were in open field and were damaged severely. It will take at least 4 to 5 weeks until product from new growing regions impacts the drop in Mexican production. Look for there to be very little product to choose from with mostly plain product available until then. Growers are also employing a strict regimen of nutrients to salvage any shade house or green house grown product to try and fill in the gap. However as in the case of shade house colored bells losses of plants in some shade houses were extensive as well.



Eggplant:

Supply of Eggplant, a hearty crop that does poorly in cold weather, continue to be tight. Open field stands I visited had been cut back. Little to no foliage remained and fruit of predominantly #2 type quality as a result of the sun exposure since the freeze. Growers are also trying to bring back this crop as it has been in short supply all season. What little new growth I observed was from mostly suckers emerging from the plants at ground level. In speaking to the agronomist, it may take 3 to 5 weeks before a fruit set produces viable crop.

In the meantime, there are indoor shade house varieties that I did have the opportunity to visit. Very few shade houses for eggplant exist in Mexico at the time, and the cold did slightly affect the foliage of the one I visited. Despite shade house grown crop; eggplant will be very, very tight for the remainder of the season.





Beans:

Bean supplies from small pockets of production are available but are rapidly winding down and will be mostly fair quality with growers pushing product. While in Culiacan I did find a stand of very young beans near a devastated grape tomato field. The beans were most likely spared due to their early stage of development, and are a very rare sign of life in the area, amongst the open field crops damaged by the frost.

