

Denise Smith Amos
St. Petersburg Times

Looking at the Florida City Farmers Market in south Dade County now, one could hardly know it plays a key role in putting Florida fruit and vegetables onto America's dinner tables.

Giant heaps of useless wood and twisted steel litter the mammoth market. Since Hurricane Andrew, it bears little resemblance to the complex of 13 shipping buildings, packinghouses and cold storage rooms that last year handled more than \$53-million worth of produce.

There, farmers used to sell 18 varieties of traditional vegetables and 31 varieties of tropical fruits and vegetables to dozens of food brokers, grocery store chains and food wholesalers. Convoys of semi-trailers rumbled through, hauling produce to grocery stores throughout the country.

Some would say that if South Florida farmers make sure America gets its vegetables during the winter, then farmers markets like Florida City's act as important traffic cops.

Florida's 15 state-run farmers markets are important links in the nation's food chain. But many of the markets' aged buildings and their limited resources endanger the system, a state survey says.

And Hurricane Andrew made matters worse. Its driving rains and the tornadoes it spawned last month demolished most of the Florida City market's buildings and eventually scattered its 650 employees. Now the state is rushing to rebuild the market by the mid-November harvest, diverting other financial resources to the \$10-million effort.

Hundreds of farmers are planting their winter crops this month, hoping to have a place to sell their harvests. And if those farmers don't plant, there will be fewer Florida-grown vegetables on the market and higher prices at the grocery stores, agriculture officials predicted.

"We had people who weren't planning to plant now putting their crops in the ground," said Michelle McLawhorn, a Florida Department of Agriculture spokeswoman.

"They were telling us, 'If you rebuild the farmers market, we will plant.' And they are. We're going to have a winter crop."

Since the 1930s, the state has supported at least 15 farmers markets. They have become expansive facilities, where farmers bring their produce to be graded, packaged and sold and where food brokers, grocery store chains and wholesale shippers negotiate prices and ship the produce to points north, west and even overseas.

Last year the markets handled more than \$245-million in wholesale produce. Only one market, in Arcadia, handles livestock. Bringing you melons, blueberries Because of heavy truck traffic, most of the state markets don't sell directly to the public, as do conventional farmers markets. A few of the state markets, such as the one in Plant City, rent space to retailers who run small open-air markets for the public.

Despite their limited access, the state farmers markets can have a profound effect on the availability of some fruits and vegetables, said Tom Martino, manager of the Plant City market, world-renowned for its strawberries.

For instance, the Plant City farmers market finally got a packinghouse tenant who handles melons, so area consumers can expect nearly a year-round supply, he said. And the newly flourishing blueberries in Hardee County are expected to be the first ones to hit the grocery stores this year and command the highest prices, thanks partly to the Wauchula farmers market.

"The state markets here help bring quality fresh produce to the public, and they help the farmer get his product out," Martino said.

The markets also cut the cost of bringing produce to the nation's food distribution system because the markets centralize everything - from the packing to the purchasing - in one location. The convenience and competition cuts some costs, and the savings eventually are passed on to consumers, said Clad Brockett, manager of the Fort Myers market.

Farmers markets also act as incubators for agricultural businesses.

Most of the markets lease packinghouses to small and medium-sized farms. The facilities package fruits and vegetables for the grower/operator and other farmers of similar size. The Plant City market, for instance, has eight packinghouses serving 145 farmers.

"The purpose of the state farmers markets is to help the little guys," Martino said. "When they grow big, they move out."

That's why many competing private packinghouses don't begrudge the help smaller operations in the farmers markets get from the state, said Gary Bates, a sales and marketing official at Collier Enterprises, a large vegetable grower and packer in Immokalee.

"Some of the growers and packers that today are located off the market started on the market," Bates said.

A long tradition shows signs of wear. Despite their importance, many of the state-run markets are hindered by their age and lack of money.

The first state-run markets were products of the Depression. In the early 1930s the system was created to help farmers sell their produce outside of Florida and help prop up the state economy.

"There was a need for rural farmers to organize to market their crops," said Francis Horne, chief of the state farmers market system. "It was an economic consideration."

The market in Sanford, just north of Orlando, was the first state-run market in the nation. (Boston operated the first municipal farmers market, now a tourist attraction.)

The Plant City market wasn't far behind. When it opened in 1939, it was the largest farmers market in the world, operating on 30 acres. In its early years, food buyers would stand on a platform in a large open shed, and farmers would line up - for nearly a mile - and sometimes wait for hours to sell their wares. Produce was hauled in on horses and wagons, tin lizzies and carts.

In the 1950s auctioneers set the price for produce, working in what was then the largest auction shed in the country. Up to 1,500 farmers crowded into it during the strawberry season and, from April to June, squash, peppers, beans and other vegetables were sold. Most traveled out of state on rail cars.

Today the auctioneers are gone. Food brokers and retail representatives negotiate prices with farmers, usually in offices or over the phone. Prevailing prices are tallied daily by a market news service in Orlando. The Plant City farmers market records those prices on a telephone service accessible to buyers and sellers. Trucks have taken the place of railcars.

But some things haven't changed. Many of the farmers market buildings were built before World War II. Some are safety hazards. Several wooden buildings have caught fire and burned down.

A University of Florida study released last month warns, "Unless necessary funds for maintenance and replacement of dangerous or obsolete facilities are forthcoming, many markets may lose their ability to serve their clientele effectively."

The study was commissioned by the Florida Department of Agriculture to help the state decide the future of the market system.

At Plant City, one building's tin roof is only half repaired because the market got only half the money it asked for to replace the roof. The unrepaired part is worn and the beams are eaten through by rust.

"Some of the floors are starting to sag and sink," Martino said. "The (strawberry) coolers are getting old and have to be knocked down and rebuilt. We need better insulation and lighting."

The situation has gotten so bad at many of the markets that tenants leasing the packinghouses have made the necessary improvements - bought coolers, built entrances, or fixed roofs and floors - even though they don't own the buildings, Bates said.

"Here's a guy spending money on state facilities . . . he's going to have to pay rent on something that he built," said Bates, who used to manage the Immokalee farmers market.

The farmers markets generate enough money for their minor upkeep and management, Horne said, but capital improvements and expansion must be approved by the Legislature. In recent years, that money hasn't been forthcoming.

"Last year we asked for \$17-million; we got \$450,000," he said.

McLawhorn, the department spokeswoman, explained it in political, pork barrel terms: "Funding for farmers markets is seen as a turkey, a local project."

The cash-starved market system can't even make the changes necessary to become more cost-efficient, the state study concludes. The study recommends that several of the older northern farmers markets be scaled down because fewer farmers need them. It also recommended that others, including Plant City's, be expanded to accommodate the growing waiting lists of farmers.

Nevertheless, the possibility of any improvements is farther out on the horizon after Hurricane Andrew, Horne said.

Though the state expects insurance and Federal Emergency Management money to pay for at least part of rebuilding Florida City's market, the other markets will have to wait until at least 1993 for financial relief. But the wait is worth it, Horne added.

"One of the bright spots in the (state) report was that the Florida City market - even with the urbanization going on down there - is projected to be successful well into the 21st century," he said.