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When icy winds freeze-dried millions of Florida's orange trees last December, the Mixon family farm was in a cozy spot.

Its 350 acres of citrus groves in Bradenton were warmed by the above-freezing gulf breezes, warming swells of the mile-wide Manatee River nearby, and the microjet irrigation system that constantly squirted steam at the citrus tree bases.

Not a tree was lost, said Dean Mixon, retail sales manager of Mixon Farms. So while other farmers scrambled to save oranges that ended up being less juicy and colorful, the Mixon family groves enjoyed a 20 percent boost in wholesale revenues.

Last week the Mixons cranked up their picking, packing and retail operation again to take advantage of another citrus windfall - an early harvest yielding more oranges than expected.

Florida's orange production is up 50 percent, with 165-million boxes expected to be harvested this season, according to a statewide crop report. The early and mid-season oranges ripened six to eight weeks early, ensuring that most oranges will be harvested by winter.

Growers are ecstatic; some considered it a sign that the industry is bouncing back.

"It's a sign of things to be - that is, if you don't have any more freezes or hurricanes," Mixon said.

Others considered the robust crop a harbinger of a more fruitful decade.

Robert Behr, economic director of the Florida Department of Citrus, told industry leaders last week that orange production will shatter records by 1995, and Florida will be restored as the dominant force in the U.S. orange juice business.

"If you think the crop report was a surprise, hang onto your seats," Behr said.

He predicted that by 1995 Florida's groves will produce a record yield of 217-million boxes of oranges. (Boxes consist of 90 pounds of oranges, about 150 to 200 pieces of fruit, depending on size and variety.) By 2000, orange production could near the 300-million-box mark, on the level of Brazil's current annual production.

Brazil's Sao Paulo district, the world's largest orange source, is expected to ship 295-million boxes this season.

"It's definitely a benefit to the consumer in a period when prices were running wild," said George J. Zulas Jr., executive vice president at Tropicana Products Inc. in Bradenton.

Typically, U.S. orange juice makers such as Tropicana use Florida oranges for 70 percent or more of their orange juice concentrate. But after last year's freeze, Brazil filled the gap at higher prices, eventually supplying more than half the frozen concentrate for U.S. companies.

Orange juice prices climbed faster than temperatures dropped. Retail prices now are 11 percent higher than they were last October, Behr said.

But Florida's flourishing citrus groves mean the state's industry will regain the driver's seat of U.S. orange juice prices, he predicted. Wholesale prices already have dropped twice since September, and retail prices are bound to follow, falling about 12 percent in the next three months, he said.

Yet some farmers aren't rejoicing over restored or increased revenues, because they're still mourning lost crops.

Bob McLean of Valrico had to sell half his acreage at distressed prices to survive the freeze. McLean, who still owns 160 acres and some of a 300-acre grove, figures he lost \$500,000 to freezes of the last decade. As caretaker and harvester of several other groves, he said he knows others who aren't benefiting from the industry's revival.

"Just get on (U.S.) 27 and drive south," he said. "You will see dead trees, rows cut to the stump, through Haines City to Frostproof."

He said he knows of two "fairly large" land purchases that fell through because the potential buyers could not afford to complete the purchases. They forfeited their purchase deposits and walked away.

"People interested in citrus land, who would be potential investors, are for the most part not able to invest," he said.

Consequently, his moments of triumph are more modest than Mixon's.

"I've been able to pick some fruit every year," he said.

"Some people in Lake County have picked nothing for several years."

Citrus production in many central and northern counties was so minuscule last season that the Department of Citrus officials didn't count it this year. They probably won't count it next year either, Behr

said.

In Polk County, "casual observation" reveals many farmers may have lost 15 percent to 20 percent of their 15-year-old and older trees last year, Behr said. Damaged trees still are dying, however, so there is no estimate on total damage.

"But there is a lot of acreage in Polk County being replanted or getting ready to be replanted, large in numbers but with a lot of different small growers," countered Bill Raley, president of the Dundee Citrus Growers Association.

In contrast, the golden crops in the southern and coastal reaches of Florida bloom with more promise every year. Western and southern counties provided 60 percent of last year's oranges and are expected to produce 74 percent this season, Behr said.

Much of that growth came from the western district, including Hillsborough, Sarasota, DeSoto, Pinellas and Hardee counties. Since 1988, the district has more than doubled its citrus output, accounting for 43 percent of Florida's oranges this season.

"Although the December 1989 freeze devastated many Florida citrus groves, record-high planting levels in recent years have actually resulted in growth in the Florida citrus tree population and hence production potential," Behr said during his presentation.

Land use is more efficient because of higher land prices, particularly in southern counties. Farmers are planting trees much closer together. Until recently, farmers planted 70 or so trees per acre, but now they fit 140 to 200 trees on an acre.

That is why total citrus acreage in Florida grew 5 percent in two years (despite the freeze) but the total number of trees grew 15 percent, said Paul Messenger, a statistics analyst at the USDA-Florida Agriculture Statistics Service in Orlando.

Many farmers like Mixon installed expensive, low-volume water systems enabling more efficient and less costly irrigation. The systems, which Southwest Florida Water Management District has strongly endorsed, cost farmers about \$80,000 to \$100,000 to install per 100 acres.

Farmers had little choice but to make the investment, said Ron Hamel, executive director of the Gulf Citrus Growers Association.

"It behooves you to put in a system to manage water better and to address the need to conserve water under the protocols of Water Management," he said.

As a result of better irrigation and fertilization, trees are bearing fruit younger - as early as 3 years old - and older ones are carrying more oranges, Messenger added.

But farmers are encountering a few bumps while harvesting their bumper crop of oranges.

For one, wholesale prices for fresh oranges are depressed, and orange juice processors are paying farmers less per orange box, said Raley of the Dundee growers association. In the months after the freeze, processors paid growers as much as \$10 a box for oranges; now the price hovers between \$4.24 and \$5 a box, about the same as last year's price before the freeze.

Fresh oranges sell for about the same as last year, too, Raley said - \$6 to \$8 a carton.

"There is a big supply available, and the price is weakening," he said.

The early maturity of the early and mid-season varieties mean the oranges are smaller and less sweet, which means farmers will get less for them from processors. "The freeze last year damaged some of the capillaries in branches," McLean said. "If you have a big crop, a tree can manufacture only so much sugar and juice, so they're small in size and lower in sugar."

About 90 percent of Florida's oranges will be used for orange juice, and most of the rest will be sold fresh, according to the Department of Citrus' recent crop report.

"The quality is good, (but) I wouldn't say that this is one of the best seasons," Raley said. "It's not a vintage crop, as they would say in the wine country."

Another result of the bumper crop is a growing demand for pickers because growers had to hire workers early.

"Farmers have a big job to accomplish," said Hugh English, former president of the Gulf Citrus Growers Association.

"It's going to take a substantially greater number of people and equipment," he said.

If nothing else, it will help farmers realize the need to plan ahead, Hamel added.

But Mixon said he knows about planning ahead, and sometimes it doesn't matter.

"Every year is so different, you can't look back on history," said Mixon, whose family has owned the farm for more than 50 years. "There's always some condition that predicates another."