



It's not certain whether running wind machines may have helped move cold air out of King's Orchards in Central Lake on May 28, when a hard freeze hit Antrim County.

Frost damage to fruit, corn, may be widespread

• Strawberries also hit by frost and cold dry weather

By LINDA GALLAGHER

ATWOOD-The verdict's not quite in yet, but it doesn't look good.

And as the once fragrant blossoms of cherries, apples, and even strawberries slowly turned brown in the aftermath of last Wednesday's hard freeze, Antrim County's fruit farmers became even grimmer in their predictions about this year's crop.

"It's not good," said Royal Farms' Sara McGuire. "We're not quite sure yet how bad we were hit," the Atwood resident said. "But we do know that the

tart cherries were hit pretty hard, and that's 50%, or maybe a bit more, of our total crop."

"Oh, and our apricots-well, I'm not sure," she said.

Just before dawn, when temperatures are always lowest, the thermometer read just 27 degrees at Royal Farms, McGuire noted, who added that her husband Patrick was out all night in the orchards, as most fruit farmers were, blowing a combination of water and air, which helps to keep cold air from settling on the trees.

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Frost

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Sadly, the long, cold night may have just been the final straw of what has been a very poor pollinating season for many fruit farmers.

"We've had days at a time this spring when it was so cold, windy, and dry that the bees wouldn't even come out of their

hives," said John King of King Orchards north of Central Lake.

"We had problems long before last Wednesday night's freeze."

King used six large wind machines, really giant, gas-guzzling fans, to push the cold air out on the 28th, when frost alarms went off at 4 a.m. Although he isn't sure if the machines helped or not, it's certain that there was a cost to their use. "Three of

them run on diesel to the tune of 6-7 gallons an hour, the other three on gasoline at 8 gallons an hour, and we ran them for three hours," he said. "So, even if we saved some fruit, we didn't get off scott-free."

Drought over the past two years has further weakened fruit trees, said Daryl Shooks of Shooks Farms north of King's. "Right now, it's easier to see the damage on the black cherries here, which were just beginning to set," he said. "That freeze was something we just didn't need with the trees already suffering from a cold, dry spring and the weather we've had in the last

few years."

Shooks said that his newly emerged corn had also suffered. "It's still too early to tell how much we've lost, but we do have damage. We know that."

At Farmer Brown's Orchards near the shores of Clam Lake in Forest Home Township, Dick Brown was especially grim. "You could say my apple trees are in injury mode-I expect my crop to be reduced by at least 50%."

Many apples on Brown's 20 acres of trees failed entirely to bloom this year, meaning no fruit at all. "There won't be any Honeycrisp or Galas at Farm-

er Brown's this year," he said sadly. "We also had a very light bloom on our Red and Golden Delicious trees, but oddly, we've got Romes blooming now, and they're ok, and lots of the Fujis appear to be coming on."

Just as heartbreaking for the Bellaire farmer was the loss of his strawberry crop. "Four acres-probably a total loss," he said grimly.

Kathy Kozlowski, Director of USDA's Farm Service Agency in Bellaire, said the extent of the damage would be most important in setting disaster relief criteria. "It might be some time before we really know how bad it was.

If reports from our offices warrant it, the governor may make a disaster declaration," she said.

Only in that event would any of Antrim's farmers be eligible for low interest government loans. "But only for farmers who have crop loss insurance," Kozlowski said. "Unfortunately, many farmers in this area don't have that insurance. They're taking a real gamble."

But that, said Sara McGuire, echoing the words of everyone spoken to, is the risk you take as a farmer. "You just have to take what Mother Nature gives you," she said. "And keep on going."