

Ohio drought conditions challenge farmers, affect on grocery prices unknown

Published: Monday, July 09, 2012, 8:00 PM Updated: Tuesday, July 10, 2012, 6:45 AM



Shaina Cavazos, The Plain Dealer

By

MIDDLEFIELD, Ohio -- The hot, dry summer has been both a blessing and a curse for farmers. But, it is too early to say how it will affect food prices at the supermarket.

Farmers welcome all that sunshine, especially after the cold snap we had in April. But what they can harvest depends largely on rainfall, and Ohio is in a moderate drought.

Zucchini, yellow summer squash, hothouse tomatoes and other heat-seeking veggies are abundant and flavorful, said Floyd Davis, general manager of the **Geauga Growers** wholesale produce auction in Middlefield.

But he hasn't seen as much cabbage, cauliflower, or broccoli, and the local sweet corn isn't faring so well. "It's not pollinating properly and when it gets real hot like this, the corn doesn't fill out completely on the ear," he said.

Steve Albrecht, president of F.W. Albrecht Grocery Co. of Akron, which operates 15 **Acme Fresh Markets**, said it's still too early to know what kind of impact the drought will have on retail produce because prices fluctuate so much.

Giant Eagle spokesman Dan Donovan said the drought has not affected food prices.

Terry Romp, chief produce buyer for the 17 **Heinen's Fine Foods**, said the last few rains have both watered the crops and lifted the spirits of local farmers and growers.

"What I'm hearing from everybody is that they've got a lot of moisture in the ground from the last three storms," he said.



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Potential buyers wait patiently for auctioneer Mike Davis to get to the smaller lots of produce at the Geauga Growers Produce Auction in Middlefield on Monday evening. There, more than 100 growers from five counties peddle their crops to area grocers, restaurant suppliers and roadside farmstands.

"I was getting texts during the rain storm saying, 'Our rain dance worked!' Everyone is in a much better mood than they were this time last week."

A cooperative of peach growers from central Ohio says that when the peaches come to market starting next week, they will be super-sweet, Romp said. Davis expects peaches will likely cost more as well.

Mark Svoboda, climatologist with the **National Drought Mitigation Center** at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said heat and lack of rain are a "double-edged sword" because droughts don't always involve intense heat waves. Both have compounded drought conditions and hastened its onset in the past 60 to 90 days.

"It just sort of feeds on itself because there's no moisture coming out of the ground because the soil is dry," Svoboda said.

Scott Boehnlein, co-owner with his wife, Kristen, of **New Creation Farm** in Geauga County, said the heat stresses his livestock, and that stress can lead to illness. Some of Boehnlein's pigs have respiratory problems and pneumonia from trying to root in the dusty ground, a problem that's uncommon in the summer months.

Steve Prochaska, an agronomy systems field specialist for the **Ohio State University Extension**, said corn and soybeans are suffering the most, because both crops are in critical stages of reproduction right now. While soybeans can compensate for the weather by putting off their reproductive process, corn has far less time to pollinate and is feeling the effects of the heat and dryness more harshly.

"If pollination does not occur and there's not enough moisture, then the kernels will abort," he said. "And if they abort, then yield loss is significant. . . And yield loss means income loss, and it's not a good situation for farmers that grow corn, which is the vast majority in Ohio."

Joe Cornely, a spokesman for the **Ohio Farm Bureau**, said affects of drought can differ from farmer to farmer, crop to crop and even from one side of the road to the other. But in general, Cornely said, it's just too hot and dry for everybody.

When temperatures top 100 degrees, not only do the more fragile crops wither, but it makes it that much harder to work outside.

"It's brutal," said Phillip Nabors, co-founder of **Mustard Seed Market & Cafe** in Solon and Montrose. "Just the hard work that you have to do to work the land. When it's that hot, it just saps the energy out of you."

The Amish workers who pick his blueberries start at 5:30 a.m. so they can be finished by 10 or 11 a.m.

He said the dry spring let people plant their crops earlier than usual, "this latest heat wave definitely wiped out some crops." The lettuces went to seed early and ended up with a bitter taste that he couldn't sell in his stores.

But the warm spring that helped fatten up the tomatoes and garlic also forced area apple trees to blossom too early,

which will likely hurt apple supplies this fall.

Michigan and New York are already warning that their apple crops will be a quarter their usual size, while Ohio will produce about half of what it did last year, Romp said.

"We're going to see record apple prices this fall," on apples as well as cider and other apple products, he said. The first crops of locally grown Lodi apples will start showing up in stores later this month, followed by Paula Reds in August.

Washington state, on the other hand, has a bumper crop of apples that will likely be in demand nationwide, he said.

Cornely said he's heard farmers talk of potentially losing anywhere from 10 to 30 percent of their yield, and it gets worse as long as the heat and dry conditions continue.

"For the most part, we're not at a point where we're going to write off the entire crop," Cornely said. "The problem is, this isn't supposed to get any better. There isn't any relief in sight."

Don Bessemer, of **Bessemer Farms Produce LLC**, in Akron, plants 160 acres of produce just within the Akron city limits, but the farm itself extends into Medina and Summit counties.

"It's hurting a great deal," Bessemer said. "We're irrigating as much as we can. If it rains within the next week, things should straighten out and be all right. If it goes another month, we'll be in worse trouble than we are in now. It's not good."

Although Bessemer irrigates 24 hours a day, it's only enough to keep crops stable for now. And irrigation alone pushes up electric and fuel bills tremendously, Bessemer said. Until the weather turns around, Bessemer said they have to live with it, and so do consumers.

"The corn is all twisted up and we're having a problem with the pumpkins. Things aren't growing right," Bessemer said. "If we get rain, things will snap back up and grow. But how long until we get rain?"

--**Janet H. Cho**, Plan Dealer Reporter.

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