

Frigid Winter's Effects Will Hit Produce Aisle

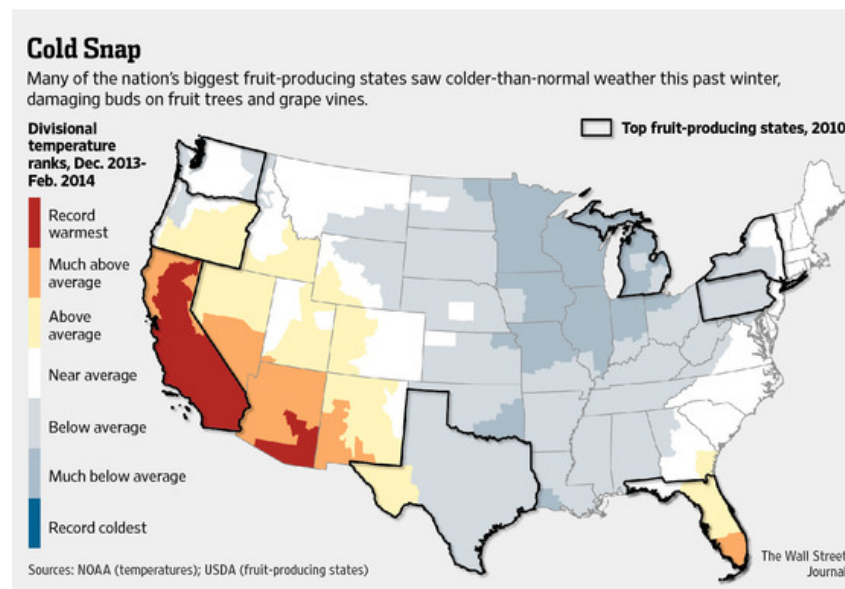
<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304819004579489590576008698?mg=reno64-wsj>

Weather Damages Buds on Fruit Trees, Grape Vines

The unusually cold temperatures and heavy snowfall that enveloped much of the U.S. this past winter have taken a toll on farms—from New York to Kansas to California—that grow everything from grapes used to make wine to wheat for baking bread.

In Michigan, fruit growers are assessing the damage after months of continuous snow cover and a high number of subzero days.

"When we got down to negative 20 degrees, we knew we would have some damage," said Ken Nye, a horticulture and forestry specialist at the Michigan Farm Bureau, who said that as plants emerge from dormancy, growers are reporting injury to wine grapes as well as peach and cherry trees. "The worst thing is it may have damaged not just the buds but trees and vines, which would have a longer-term impact."



Steve Tennes, a Charlotte, Mich., fruit grower, predicted he could see a total loss of his peach and sweet-cherry crops from damage to the buds. Although his apple trees fared better, piles of snow enabled rabbits to chew off many more buds than usual, said Mr. Tennes, 36 years old, the owner of Country Mill Farms.

Michigan experienced its coldest winter in about 37 years, and six other Midwestern states—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin—had their coldest one in roughly 35 years, according to the National Climatic Data Center at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The extent of the crop damage in the Midwest isn't yet known, said Annemarie Kuhns, an agricultural economist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Already, the USDA projects the cost of fresh fruit will rise 2.5% to 3.5% nationwide this year.

A December cold snap battered California's \$2 billion citrus industry as seven consecutive nights of freezing temperatures enveloped the San Joaquin Valley, where 75% of the state's citrus fruit is grown, said Bob Blakely, director of industry relations for California Citrus Mutual. The growers group said the bitter air wiped out an estimated 40% of the Central Valley's mandarin orange crop, 30% of its navel oranges and 20% of its lemons, totaling roughly \$441 million in lost revenue.

Extreme temperatures, coupled with several years of drought, also hurt the wheat crop in parts of the southern Plains, where winter varieties of the grain are grown. "We've seen pretty significant deterioration," said Brad Rippey, a meteorologist for the USDA, who added that wheat in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas has been hardest hit. "It gives producers very little margin of error."

Before extreme weather hit, 63% of the winter wheat crop in Kansas was rated good or excellent, according to the USDA. Cold weather combined with persistent drought has caused crop ratings in the state to decline to just 29% good or excellent on April 6.

Meantime, wine-grape growers in states including New York and Ohio reported widespread damage. Five New York counties, some in the major wine-producing area of the Finger Lakes, were designated primary natural disaster areas last month by the USDA, while 14 more New York counties and three in Pennsylvania qualified for natural disaster assistance.

Riesling, the signature grape of the Finger Lakes region, experienced the worst year in a decade due to the subzero temperatures, said Hans Walter-Peterson, a grape educator at Cornell University. "This year knocks you for a loop," he said.

Ohio wine-grape growers also plan to ask lawmakers for federal assistance, according to Gary Gao, associate professor of fruit crops at Ohio State University. Mr. Gao said he is "seeing 100% bud kill" in the samples he has seen of the state's vinifera grapes, used to make Riesling, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon wines. They are "pretty much shot," he said.

"This winter of 2014 has been the most difficult since we started in 1972," said Tony Debevc, the 66-year-old owner and president of Debonne Vineyards and its winery in northeast Ohio. He manages 170 acres of grapes and estimates "somewhere between 98% to 100% loss" for this year's vinifera crop, or a \$500,000 loss in raw material.

"Mother Nature takes what she wants," said Mr. Debevc. "I don't like it but accept it."

—Tony Dreibus contributed to this article.