

Farmers replanting lost crops

By PAUL F. POWER Jr.
Tribune Staff Writer

RUSKIN — South bay farmers faced the heartache Monday of replanting crops ruined by weekend record-cold temperatures.

And farmworkers, many of whom live from hand-to-mouth on field labor wages, wondered how much of the crops could be salvaged and how much work they would have this spring.

"The weather is an act of God," Wimauma migrant worker Maria Gomez said Monday. "No one likes it, but still the problem is there. We have to make ends meet, or we won't survive."

The Hillsborough and Manatee county area accounts for the lion's share — about 40 percent — of the spring tomato crop grown in Florida, and crop loss in the district could be more than 50 percent, officials said.

Near Ruskin, farm production supervisor Steve Fradin asked a crew of six to strip dead plants from their stakes. He intended to replant 140 acres where young tomato plants were wiped out.

"We're getting down to the nitty-gritty," said Fradin, who noted that such vegetables as squash and cucumbers were far easier to replant because they are not grown on stakes and consequently require less labor.

New tomatoes may be ready for harvesting in about 90 days. By then, migrant workers should have plenty of work, Fradin said.

Tomato harvests normally are staggered, eliminating a surge of fruit onto the market at once. Part of Fradin's spring crop had been planted Jan. 16. But with many

farmers trying to get their fields back in full production again, he said, those tomatoes will hit the market at the same time and force growers to sell their crop at low prices.

"We think we'll still make a crop," said Fradin, an employee of Lipman and Lipman Co. of Immokalee, a subsidiary of Six L's Packing Co. Inc.

Agriculture experts said Monday they did not know how much of the lost crops would be replanted and could not precisely forecast the overall impact of last weekend's cold-weather damage to the state's \$1.1 billion produce industry.

In Manatee and Hillsborough counties, which suffered through a dismal fall tomato harvest because of torrential rains last September, more than 8,000 acres are usually planted in tomatoes for spring.

And uncertainty was the watchword among migrant relief volunteers who said a reduction in available work, or a schedule that is severely disrupted, spells trouble for migrants.

"These people live day-to-day and have no savings," Nubia Rucker, migrant services coordinator at Holy Cross Church in Palmetto, said Monday.

"It's a bad cycle," said Rucker, whose church is in the center of Manatee County's tomato packing area.

Migrant Gomez, the mother of 14 children who emigrated to the United States 15 years ago from Monterey, Mexico, said cold weather in Texas this winter injured onions, cabbage and other crops and drove more migrants to Florida in



Tribune photograph by PHIL SHEFFIELD
Workers pull wilted tomato plants from rows of plants at the Lipman and Lipman Co. fields off U.S. Highway 301 near Balm.

Cold, crop damage may hurt migrants

search of a better way of life.

That influx, combined with relaxed immigration rules that have enabled thousands of illegal workers to obtain work cards, creates more competition for Florida agricultural jobs.

Gomez also extended her sympathies to tomato growers, who in 1987 had established their crop as a \$490 million annual business, the state's top produce crop.

"They have to deal with disasters, too," she said.

More and more migrants can be

expected to seek aid such as food at relief centers, said the Rev. William Cruz, pastor of the Good Samaritan Mission in Balm.

The most pressing time will be between the end of the strawberry and citrus harvests, now under way, and the start of the vegetable and tomato crops, he said.

Chris Falkner, manager of Falkner Farms near Sun City Center, said he lost 75 percent of his 800 acres of cucumbers to the freeze; tractors will reseed the land. Sarasota County crop damage was described as less severe than in Hillsborough and Manatee.

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