

# Florida's Citrus Groves Hit Hard By Hurricane Irma

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Hurricane Irma hit Florida's citrus groves hard. NPR's Kelly McEvers speaks with Ellis Hunt Jr., a Florida citrus grower and Chairman of the Florida Citrus Commission about the damage.

KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

Hurricane Irma, which tore through the Caribbean and across Florida earlier this month, complicated life for a lot of people, including Florida citrus growers. Ellis Hunt Jr.'s family has been in the Florida citrus business for almost 100 years. He has 5,000 acres of citrus trees, and a lot of these trees were badly damaged.

I talked to Hunt today. And before I did, I looked at pictures he'd shared with us of trees bent sideways and uprooted and trees still under a lot of water with what looked like hundreds of grapefruits floating on top.

ELLIS HUNT JR: The pictures don't do it justice. When you stand there and you physically smell the stagnant water and the rotting grass and the fruits laying in the water and it's a whole crop that was weeks away from being ready to harvest and all the time and effort and dollars that went into raising that crop are lost, it's devastating.

MCEVERS: Right. So how would you quantify it? How badly has this storm hit the citrus industry overall?

HUNT JR: It's a severe blow. I mean, you know, all farmers are extremely resilient and tough and just so stubborn that no matter what happens, they all get up, and we go again because that's what you do if you're a farmer. But it's a very significant blow, especially south Florida region and the Indian River. They're great growing regions. But they're also flat, and you can't get rid of the water quick enough. And so these trees have been standing in water for 10-plus days. And they cannot take that.

So does that weakened tree bear a crop next spring? It's really too early to know the significance of this damage, but just looking at the fruit on the ground - what we've lost immediately is this year's crop and all of the dollars spent on this year's crop. And beyond just the loss of this fruit and the effect on the grower, it's the jobs for all these employees, the citrus industry employees - close to 46,000 people - and that trickle-down effect where it's immediate for those people. So this is impacting 46,000 lives and their communities.

MCEVERS: You know, you said it's hard to assess the damage right now, but are we talking about just one season here? Are we talking about a much bigger-scale damage?

HUNT JR: You know, it's still kind of early to tell, but I would think at least - and this is the state as a whole. Maybe it's 50, 60 percent loss, and that's just a guess.

MCEVERS: 'Cause there are some articles in the newspaper saying, you know, the industry was already hurting from disease, from a downturn in demand for orange juice in particular. I know you said farmers don't like to talk in a pessimistic way, but are you feeling kind of pessimistic right now about the industry?

HUNT JR: No because like I say, we're just stubborn. We're going to fight back 'cause that's what we've been doing. My family's been doing this since 1922. I'm a third-generation citrus grower. I know growers that are fourth-, fifth-, sixth-generation growers. So when you've been doing something for close to a hundred years in your family - over the last hundred years, there's been numerous things that were going to be the end of the citrus industry. And lo and behold, we keep finding ways to fight back.

MCEVERS: Ellis Hunt Jr. is a citrus grower and chairman of the Florida Citrus Commission. Thank you so much for talking to us today.

HUNT JR: Thank you.

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