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**Texas growers see Valentine's Day produce massacre**

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By

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Valentine's night of 2021 will be remembered as the "Valentine's Day massacre for the fruit and vegetable industry of south Texas," Bret Erickson, senior vice president of business affairs for J&D Produce Inc., said the follow morning.

J&D, one of Texas' largest fresh vegetable growers, has a large packing and shipping facility in Edinburg, TX, and grows thousands of acres of vegetables throughout the lower reaches of the Rio Grande Valley.

"We had temperatures of 24, 25 degrees at our farms," he said. "This was a whopper, with more to come." When asked if any vegetables survive that cold for extended periods, he said, "I doubt it. We are prepared for the worst but hoping for the best. The celery and greens are all going to be 'toast'."

He withheld hope that onions and other root crops might have survived, but "tonight is supposed to be as cold as it was last night, if not colder."

Erickson said J&D's field temperatures dropped to 32 at midnight, after a cold Valentine's Day. "We're below freezing now, and it's not to get back to 32 until noon today. That's 12 hours below freezing."

Erickson heard that some citrus growers endured temperatures of 21 on Valentine's night. Temperatures for the night of Feb. 15-16 were below freezing for 12 to 14 hours. "At the end of the day, very little of what we grow can survive." He hopefully added the afterthought, "We're not sure."

Erickson said growers in Winter Garden, TX, had fields that were below freezing for several days. "Cabbage and broccoli are hardy, but for that many days, it's hard to survive."

Erickson added, "We are all stressed" by losses from the "unheard of" cold. "But at the end of the day, that's nature and farming. You win some and you lose some. We'll take our licks here and move forward."

Dante Galeazzi, CEO of the Texas International Produce Association, said on the morning of Feb. 15 that many south Texas homes — and produce offices and packing houses — were without power. Not only were residents perilously cold, but produce companies were trying to operate without electricity. Galeazzi said produce firms have functioned in the past by running a computer and printer from their vehicles' electric power. He suggested that bills of lading would probably be printed from front seats again this week.

Preliminary efforts to reach the Texas citrus industry were unsuccessful, but Erickson said some citrus groves were reported to have suffered temperatures as low as 21. Erickson said Texas citrus

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harvest was expected to have run for another six weeks. His understanding was that more than fruit-on-trees was harmed. The citrus trees were blooming for next year's crop. And citrus trees also suffered damage.

Galeazzi said growers in Uvalde, TX, had five or six inches of snow on the morning of Feb. 15.

In the southern Rio Grande Valley, it rained throughout Valentine's Day weekend. Galeazzi offered hope that rain, which was still on crops as freezing temperatures arrived, would have turned to an ice coating and offered some protection from deepening cold.

At a minimum, Texas citrus trees suffered leaf burn, Galeazzi said. "Like any weather event, it will take a week or two to know the extent of damage.: some things will bounce back — others won't. Definitely, there are some people who are going to be hurt."

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