

Persistent rain adds to worries for farms

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Persistent rainfall has kept the state's largest commercial grower of organic vegetables out of the fields this spring, but his crop of organic sweet potatoes from 2019 is paying the bills.

"I haven't planted one acre yet," Shawn Peebles who, along with his wife, Kelly, grows certified-organic vegetables and edamame across 2,000 acres in Woodruff, Prairie and White counties, said last week.

This year's work, once planted, will consist of 350 acres of organic sweet potatoes, 550 acres of edamame and the remainder in blackeyed peas, processor pumpkins, green beans and soybeans.

Peebles said he still has time to plant and get a good crop for this year, but the planting window for the best yields for all of his crops closes every day.

Planting of soybeans, cotton, corn and rice also is lagging, behind even last season, which was marred by a wet spring and the flooding of much of the Arkansas River.

"Every grower of any crop is in the same position," said Peebles, who switched from conventional farming to an entirely organic operation about 12 years ago. "My dad grows watermelons. They've been planted, but they're little and they're yellow. We had 40-degree morning just a few days ago. Crop conditions for anything are poor right now, at best."

The coronavirus pandemic and its aftershocks have affected farming operations regardless of size or product.

Small vegetable farms, ranchers and dairy operations have been scrambling to find other ways to sell their produce, meats and milk because of disruptions in their supply chains. Farmers markets have instituted contact-free drive-thru operations. Larger farms that utilize seasonal, non-migrant workers could see a labor shortage.

John D. Anderson, an agriculture economics professor at the University of Arkansas System's Division of Agriculture, told legislators last week that a lot of attention so far has been paid to "short-run impacts," such as the almost-overnight loss of food-service business, the economic slowdown and disruption in the labor force.

The effects of other issues -- such as a drop in consumer confidence, a disruption in the flow of trade, salary reductions and depletion of savings -- will last for much longer, he said.

The pandemic has particularly disrupted farming in Texas, Florida and California, where produce and fruit growers have felt the simultaneous crunch of a labor shortage and a drop in demand for their products.

Some airports, embassies and consulates shut down at least temporarily, putting a sudden halt -- or a considerable delay -- in the arrival of many foreign laborers to the U.S. as part of its H-2A seasonal, non-migrant farm-labor program. At the same time, demand for fruits and vegetables grown in those states dropped because of the closing of schools and restaurants scaling back their operations.

Arkansas has seen little, if any, of that for a couple of reasons, said Peebles, a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Committee for three years.

Arkansas isn't a major commercial producer of fruits and vegetables, he said, adding, "that's not to say it isn't a big crop to those of us who do grow them."

Growing and harvesting seasons in Texas, Florida and California are much earlier than in Arkansas. "Those crops were ready just as the shutdown began," Peebles said.

SWEET POTATO RUSH

Peebles Organic Farm is based in a 70,000-square-foot building in Augusta (Woodruff County) that was once a nail factory.

Much of Peebles' sweet potato crop each year, by contract, goes to the Costco retail grocery chain, which has the the sweet potatoes processed into chips.

He also stored 1.5 million pounds of sweet potatoes from last year's crop to sell this year. Normally, that would be enough to last into this fall's harvest, he said.

"About a month and a half ago, though, we started selling sweet potatoes like it was Thanksgiving every week," Peebles said. "I can tell you right now we'll be sold out next month."

Major retailers, such as Costco, and processors can determine the market for a number of commodities with just a few telephone calls, Peebles said.

"They knew what was coming," he said. "I still get phone calls every day from people I've never heard of asking for organic sweet potatoes. While there's one side of agriculture that has lost almost its entire market, another side has seen growth."

This year's harvest is uncertain, mainly because of the wet spring. "You never have a harvest unless you get a crop," he said.

LABOR HICCUPS

"So far we've managed pretty well from the best of my knowledge," said Andrew Grobmyer, executive vice president of the Arkansas Agricultural Council. "Labor sourcing is often a challenge, and there were some [early] hiccups for H-2A workers, but many were able to get them through prior to the travel restrictions."

Farmers must certify that they're unable to fill jobs with local workers before they can bring in H-2A workers. Started in 1986, the H-2A program restricts seasonal, temporary jobs to those of less than a year. About 90% of the workers come from Mexico.

According to the Cato Institute think tank, the U.S. Department of Labor certified 7,513 H-2A jobs in Arkansas in 2018, or 10.5% of agriculture-related jobs in Arkansas. Nationally, the number of certified H-2A jobs grew from 48,336 in 2005 to 257,667 in 2018, or about 10% of the 1.4 million full-time equivalent agriculture jobs, Cato said in a report released March 20.

"Given the high costs and regulatory complexities of the H-2A program, farmers use it as a last resort," Cato wrote. The jobs primarily are in labor-intensive fruit and vegetable operations.

The coronavirus adds another challenge to the requirement that farmers provide housing for their H-2A workers and transportation between their temporary homes and the farms.

Grobmyer said his group has been reminding its members "to implement and practice" guidelines of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Department of Labor for safe practices in farmer-supplied housing and in the fields. "We can't let our guard down against this virus," Grobmyer said.

The Department of Labor recently announced that, because of the need for social distancing, it will allow farmers to alter housing plans from what the department originally approved in the applications for H-2A workers. Still, the farmers must notify the agency of the changes.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services on April 20 said it will temporarily lift the 3-year limit that H-2A workers can remain in the U.S. at any one time. That will allow farmers whose H-2A workers are unable to arrive in the U.S. because of the pandemic to fill those jobs with H-2A workers already here.

Back in Woodruff County, where Peebles also operates an agri-tourism business between Augusta and McCrory, Peebles relies on a crew of about 60 workers every year to plant and harvest his crops. This year's crew consists of 40 workers from Mexico, two from South Africa and 18 local hires.

His crew of H-2A workers from Mexico arrived just last weekend -- two workers short and a few days later than usual. That's because the U.S. consulate in Mexico was closed for a time, and travel and visa applications had to be processed by telephone. "There was just a lot of confusion," he said.

Two workers from South Africa haven't arrived yet at Peebles' farm because of restrictions on international travel. Flights from South Africa to the U.S., for now, are scheduled to resume June

4, Peebles said. The two workers -- skilled at operating Peebles' machinery -- had been scheduled to arrive April 15.

The H-2A workers are housed in the former Woodruff County Hospital in Augusta. Peebles has rented it from the county for \$1 a year for the past three years. The small farming community, in a sort of return, gets a work crew in town spending money at local convenience stores and restaurants well into the fall.

Peebles has developed a plan for social-distancing, as much as possible, on his farm. There's also enough room in the former hospital to separate workers who might show any symptoms of the coronavirus from colleagues.

In the meantime, he's hoping all of his workers show up. If they don't, he'll look again for local help.

"The labor deal hurts, but it's not devastating," Peebles said of the delays and possible shortage. "It's a huge inconvenience. It's going to make it a little harder, the hours a little longer, and a little more inefficient. Workers will be a little less