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Orleans apple growers suffer loss from storm

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Fred Nesbitt of Silver Creek Farms shook his head when asked how this year's apple harvest will hold up following last week's devastating windstorm.

"This isn't going to be good," he said.

Violent winds blew ripening Macintosh apples from trees, drove hail through other varieties and pulled trees from the ground, from young trees planted last year to two 60-year-old trees, the oldest on Silver Creek Farms. Nesbitt's experience is typical of the

losses suffered by Orleans County apple growers.

"It's not just apples that are ready to be picked, but apples that won't be ready for six weeks," Nesbitt said. "We've lost a lot of fruit. I'm guessing maybe a third of the crop are on the ground. A lot of apples left on the trees are damaged by the hail or bruising."

Nesbitt's employees have been collecting the dropped apples to sell for apple cider, but those apples can only be sold for a fraction of the cost to grow and collect them, he said.

"The problem is the current cider prices; it costs more to pick them up," he said, noting the apples needed to be gathered and in some orchards employees were tripping over them. "The only reason I'm doing that is if I don't give the pickers something to do, they'll leave me."

Roughly 80 percent of Nesbitt's Macintosh crop blew from the trees during the storm, he said.

"They're ripe," he said. "We were going to start picking them (last) Tuesday."

What cuts more deeply into production for the next few years is the loss of the trees, Nesbitt said. He estimates his farm lost about 1,000 trees. Those the wind didn't blow over, other trees and branches fell on, killing them, too.

"We've lost this year's product and next year's," he said. "We cut back our production for four or five years."

The New York Apple Association estimates about five million bushels were lost throughout the state from the storm, which cut a swath of destruction through Western New York and across to Long Island. The association also estimates the cost of the state-wide loss to growers like Nesbitt at \$30 million.

"This is the most devastating year ever for the New York State apple industry," said NYAA President Michael Durando. "This storm comes on the heels of what was already a challenging year for apple growers due to frost, earlier hail damage, floods in some areas, drought in others, ice storms and an extremely weak market for juice apples."

The storm was among the worst Nesbitt said he's ever experienced. He said he came into his office, where the door had been left open for the summer night's cooler air, to find the wind blowing the rain straight across the room.

"It was a fierce little storm we had there," Nesbitt said. "The lightning just wouldn't stop. It was a shaky daylight out there. I just couldn't believe how fast the wind was going. We had barn doors blow off and smash."

The farms were without electricity for most of last week, Nesbitt said. He spent the early part of the week inspecting the damage and making arrangements to continue operations.

"I was in a daze all day Monday (Labor Day). I just couldn't believe it," he said. "The orchards themselves were a heartbreaker. This is the worst damage a farmer can get."



Apple grower Fred Nesbitt looks at a tree of golden delicious apples that are bruised with hail marks from the Labor Day storm. He estimates a third of his apple crop was on the ground and he'll have culls of about 30 percent from the apples that didn't fall.

(Albion Photo By Karen Sampson)