

Budget cuts, not mother nature, caused Florida crop damage

by Richard Freeman

On Jan. 18-19, frost struck Florida's winter vegetable crop, causing an estimated \$270 million in damages. Normally, the National Weather Service's (NWS) agricultural forecast division would have warned Florida farmers that frost was coming, so that they could take standard preventive action against it. But Florida's NWS agricultural forecast division, based in Tampa, which would have assembled and put out the forecast, had been disbanded in April 1996, as a result of a \$3.3 million budget cut instituted by the "Contract on America" gang in Congress in 1995. Therefore, no forecast was available.

Florida produces 50 to 75% of America's winter vegetables (depending on the levels of imports), including zucchini, green beans, peas, yellow squash, hot and sweet peppers, sweet corn, eggplant, and cucumbers. Southern Florida produces most of the state's output. According to the office of Florida Agricultural Commissioner Bob Crawford, 85% of the area's zucchini, green beans, yellow squash, and hot and sweet peppers, and 75% of the sweet corn, were destroyed. The damage to winter vegetables and, to a lesser extent, citrus crops, totalled at least \$300 million.

One week after the frost, winter vegetable prices rose by as much as 33% in Florida. Squash, which had sold for \$1.16 per pound on Jan. 17, increased in price to \$1.40 by Jan. 24; green beans went from \$1.16 per pound, to \$1.54. The price increases will soon become national, affecting families which are already hard hit by the collapse in family living standards. On Jan. 26, Tom Kirby, spokesman for the Dade County, Florida Farm Bureau, stated, "In addition to the crops, there are other losses. Farm workers won't now be able to work for 45 to 60 days, until the next crop comes in. Packing houses will lose work; truckers who would truck the vegetables across the United States will lose work. The lost tax revenues are considerable."

The national media immediately blamed the damage on frost and "Mother Nature." Rather, the damage is the result of America pursuing insane economic policies: the British monetarist insistence on budget cutting of vital infrastructure and scientific capabilities, in the mistaken belief that one is "saving money." On the contrary, as the Florida case shows, for every \$1 "saved," there is \$100 in immediate crop losses, and even more, once the spillover effects are counted.

The 'Contract on America' assault

On Jan. 28, Paul Hebert, the chief meteorologist for the NWS in Miami, detailed the events which account for the deadly consequences of the cut in the agricultural weather forecast program. In late 1995, the "Contract on America" gang instituted cuts in three NWS programs, which completely shut them down. The cuts included:

- \$2.3 million from the agricultural weather forecast division;
- \$500,000 from the marine radio facsimile program;
- \$500,000 from the fire weather forecast service.

The Miami NWS office is southern Florida's central forecast office. It serves the main population centers in southern Florida, *but it lacks the capacity to monitor and forecast the weather for the rural agricultural districts in Florida.* That function had been performed by the Weather Service's agricultural forecast division, which maintained a four-person office just outside Tampa, which, Hebert said, "was hooked into approximately 100 thermographs [these are thermometers which print out their readings] throughout the state. When the Weather Service's agricultural forecast division was in service, this Tampa office gathered the weather information to tell farmers what the forecast would be in their area."

But, in April 1996, the Tampa office (and its functions) was shut down as a result of the October 1995 budget cut. So, on Jan. 18, 1997, the day before the frost, the NWS center in Miami forecast for the main population centers in southern Florida that the temperature would drop to about 37°F, but not go below freezing. This was accurate for the main population centers.

But, in the agricultural districts, temperatures fell further, to below freezing, and as low as 24°F. Had the four-person Tampa office been functioning, it could have warned by 7 p.m. on Jan. 18, that temperatures in agricultural areas would drop below freezing the next day. Normally, farmers called into the Tampa office nightly on a dedicated phone line to find out the forecast, and such information was also regularly carried on a radio weather channel which farmers monitored. Farmers with small farms could have turned on sprinklers, and taken other measures to prevent a significant part of the frost damage. Farmers with large farms could also turn on sprinklers, though some would have had to mobilize their

pumps and tractors from storage areas. This would have required some marshalling of farm hands and hired help, but when a farmer's crop is on the line, he will often take whatever measures are necessary and work through the night. Although firm figures do not exist, a significant portion of several crops could have been saved.

Instead, as much as 85% of some Florida winter vegetables were destroyed during the morning and afternoon of Jan. 19. The damage to the winter vegetables is placed at \$270 million, plus there is some damage to the state's citrus crop.

The assault is not over

An additional factor adding to the pressure to shut down the NWS's agricultural forecast division was the "Reinventing Government" program, which is intended to "streamline" government, directed by Vice President Al Gore. Gore shared Gingrich's rationale for shutting down the agricultural weather forecast government program, which was that the private sector could do the job just as well, without taxpayers having to pay the cost. Obviously, that was wrong.

Also eliminated in the \$3.3 million budget cut, was the NWS's fire weather program. Although the federal government still monitors forest fires, it used to be that if a farmer, or whoever wanted to burn some part of his field (or some area), he would call the government to get wind forecasts, to make sure the fire didn't spread. Now, he can't do that. Also eliminated was the Weather Service's marine radio facsimile program, which faxed marine weather conditions to boaters and shipowners.

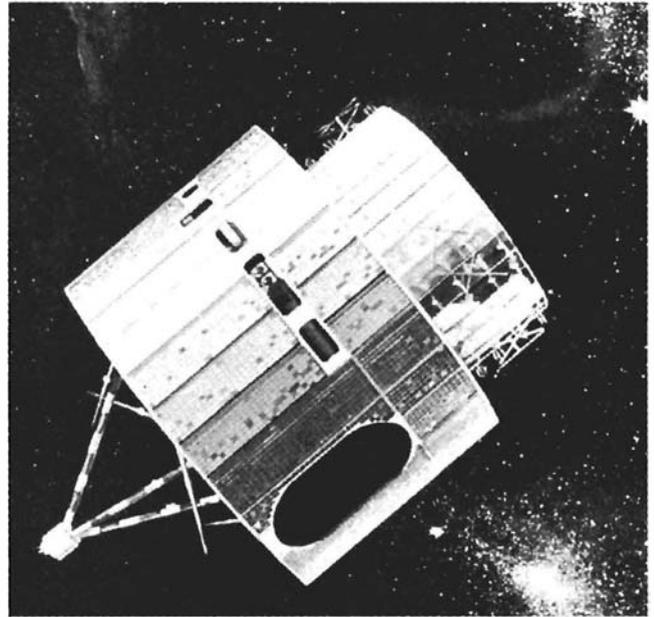
The Florida events of Jan. 18-19 demonstrate the folly of the budget-cutting and privatization approach.

Yet the "Contract on America" shock-troops have more of this approach in store. They want to break up the NWS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), of which the NWS is a part. In turn, NOAA is the largest department in the Department of Commerce.

Until the budget-cutting started, NOAA's and the NWS's overlapping responsibilities included providing specialized forecasts for agriculture, construction, transportation, and other applications; measuring sea-surface temperatures for marine activities, and monitoring and predicting climate; using multispectral imaging of the atmosphere and land surfaces to detect and monitor forest fires; global drought watch; global mapping of vegetation, precipitable water, snow, and ice coverage; forecasting sea ice, predicting snow melt, for managing water resources and flood control; and so on.

In order to carry out this function, NOAA and the NWS maintain an integrated and advanced system, which includes utilizing four overhead satellites—two in geostationary orbit, and two orbiting across the North and South poles, as well as a host of land-based weather instruments.

The annual budget of the parent institution, NOAA, is \$1.75 to 2 billion per year. But its functioning makes possible real physical economic activity in the United States worth



GOES, one of four NOAA satellites used for weather analysis, is in geostationary orbit. GOES provides a full-disk image of nearly one-third of the Earth's surface, every 23 minutes, with a spatial resolution of two miles.

several hundred times that cost.

In 1995, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), and the conservative revolution crowd proposed disbanding the Commerce Department, and selling off NOAA and the NWS to Wall Street sharks. The functions of NOAA and the NWS would be run on a "for profit" basis. Whatever couldn't turn a profit would be scrapped. The highly efficient, integrated NOAA-NWS system would be fragmented or shut down. In 1995, the Gingrich crew had to settle for the closing of the agricultural weather forecast and related divisions of the Weather Service, but they view that as merely a step in implementing their overall strategy.

Now, there is talk of not providing sufficient federal funding to launch 15 weather satellites by the year 2010 on the schedule needed to keep four working weather satellites in the sky to provide weather information for the United States. The life expectancy of a satellite is 1.55 to 9.30 years, or 5.5 years on average. In 1993, one weather satellite that was launched became dysfunctional within two weeks of its launch; thus, redundancy is needed.

It is about time the United States put a halt to the Conservative Revolution's strategy. The budget-cutting and subsequent privatizing of the services of the agricultural weather forecast division cost America millions in lost crops on Jan. 19 in Florida, as well as other added economic losses. America should stop blaming Mother Nature or Jack Frost. The root of the problem is closer to home: the abandonment of a policy of infrastructure maintenance and expansion, which tames nature and brings it closer to obeying man's command.