HOW THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES COULD HIT THE COOP

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ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

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By Anita Bushell

The Park Slope Food Coop contains a great many fruits and vegetables from Califor-

nia. As I walked down the produce aisle the week after the Los Angeles fires broke out, I wondered how the situation unfolding 3,000 miles away would affect the produce on offer at the Coop.

In the warmer months that constitute the Northeast growing season, the Coop mostly sources from nearby farms and growing cooperatives. Produce Manager John Horsman said, “We try to buy locally as much as possible,” noting that the California produce buying season usually lasts from the late fall through the early spring.

In the short term, the Coop doesn’t expect the Los Angeles fires to have a major impact on the availability of California produce. “Based on my experience, it will be minimal” said General Manager Joe Holtz.

> STRONG SANTA ANA WINDS ARE CAUSING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO AVOCADO GROVES AND VINEYARDS.

While exact figures are not available as to how much of the Coop’s produce comes from California, my walk down the aisle suggested that there are many items from the Golden State, from juicy oranges to super-fresh salad greens. Horsman said that this year’s California shipments, before the fires, were about the same as they were one year ago.

The State of California is around 250 miles wide and more than 700 miles long. While the effects of last month’s fires are localized to Los Angeles county, destruction has already been seen 100 miles southeast in the Pauma Valley, where strong Santa Ana winds caused extensive damage to avocado groves and vineyards. “Our farmers are our backbone of our local food system, and these fires remind us how fragile that system can be,” Alba Velasquez, the executive director of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council, told ABC News.

Horsman said that the Coop started purchasing produce from California “because California has been able to dominate nationally due to their many growing areas and micro-climates and economies of scale.” California is a major producer of grapes, lettuce, almonds, pistachios, strawberries, tomatoes, and carrots; all of which helped bring the state $23.96 billion dollars in revenue in 2023.

According to Horsman, a number of the huge farms that supply greens and root vegetables to the Coop are in the Central Valley, which is located more than 100 miles north of Los Angeles. The Central Valley has been relatively unaffected by the current fires. On the other hand, the avocado and citrus crops closer to Los Angeles continue to be threatened by the smoke from the fires and the Santa Ana winds.

Farms don’t have to be local to Los Angeles to feel the economic impact of the fires. Underwood Family Farms is located in Moorpark, 340 miles north of the city, but their staff could not sell at the Brentwood or Pasadena markets in January because of dangerous conditions and poor air quality. This resulted in few visitors and diminished sales.

Other farms local to Los Angeles are also feeling the economic impact of the fires, as well as poor air quality, flames and smoke. “Currently there are about 24 farms that are affected by the Eaton Fire, with numbers increasing every day,” Velasquez told ABC News.

The California environment has adjusted to moderate fires over the years. Many native trees, shrubs and perennials to the region are said to be fire-resistant, but were not cut out to withstand the ravages of last month. “While most native species have adapted to withstand smaller, naturally occurring fires, they aren’t built for the high--intensity blazes the state has seen in recent years,” said Kevin Tidmarsh of local news outlet LAist.

CALIFORNIA IS A MAJOR PRODUCER OF GRAPES, LETTUCE, ALMONDS, PISTACHIOS,

STRAWBERRIES, TOMATOES, AND CARROTS.

A January 15 post on Farms.com stated: “The Santa Ana winds, infamous for their speed and intensity, exacerbate the spread of wildfires, and add to the challenges faced by farmers. These winds carry dust and smoke from the fires across coastal Southern California, further endangering crops and air quality.”

The Coop began buying California produce in 1973, the year of its founding, according to Holtz. The California items that sell the fastest are broccoli and oranges.

“Initially, in 1973, we knew relatively little about the dominance by the West Coast in providing fresh veggies and fruits to the New York City area,” Holtz said. “Produce from California was dominant during that time, even for items that could have been produced locally. But starting in late June 1975 we started an 11-year period where we went to the market ourselves and gained valuable knowledge about what items were possible to get from local farms, and where in Hunts Point Market we could buy them. That made a big difference in our effectively buying as much from the local growing area whenever the quality met our standards.”

As the current fires remain contained to the Los Angeles area, Horsman and Holtz see relatively little impact on the Coop’s California produce buying. Long term concerns, however, include future fires that could affect Central Valley crops.

“We will always try hard to look for food so that our members’ food needs are covered,” Holtz stated. “Beyond searching for sources of food that our members need, there is no exact plan. Example of a theoretical situation: Any day now the North American asparagus harvest should be starting. It starts in Mexico and after a little while it moves up into southern California. What if that pattern doesn’t pan out this year and there is instead a great reduction in asparagus from southern California? What would we do?”

Holtz contuned, “Might there still be Peruvian asparagus available which is what we are getting now? Would the price go sky high? Would we buy it even at a high price? Would some members buy less? Would some members buy more zucchini etc. instead? I have no answers, only questions. The important thing is that we will pivot and try to make decisions that make sense in making it as certain as possible that our members will have something good to cook and eat.”

When I walk down the produce aisle this winter, I’ll keep an eye out for changes in produce availability. And I’ll load up on my beloved Sumo Mandarins, from California’s San Joaquin Valley, for as long as I can.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer who has been published in Friends Journal*,* Ford Foundation Report*, and* Uncensored: American Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness*. She just published* One Way to Whitefish*.*