

Fresh produce impacted by heatwave and floods

Wednesday 11 February 2009: Severe heat and fires in southern parts of Australia and flood waters in the north have had a significant impact on the supply of fresh food to supermarkets.

Woolworths General Manager of Fresh Produce, Mr Michael Batycki, said Woolworths supplies of some fruit and vegetables had been affected by harsh weather conditions experienced by Australian farmers.

“With floods in North Queensland along with bushfires and extreme heat conditions experienced in a wide number of growing areas across southern Australia our farmers are doing it tough. The full impact of the heat wave, fires and floods is not yet fully known but we expect supplies for fresh fruits and vegetables from these areas to vary in coming months.

“Woolworths is working closely with our growers in these areas. We will vary product specifications and supply arrangements in order to support our growers and maintain a consistent supply of fresh fruits and vegetables as possible to our stores,” Mr Batycki said.

Floods affect banana supply

“In North Queensland, the floods have affected bananas with some of our farmers losing a significant proportion of their crop, while others have been unable to reach their properties. No fresh supplies of bananas have been able to reach the market for close to a week and while we are now seeing some movement of transports, we expect supplies of bananas to remain sporadic over the next few weeks.

“Customers will notice that bananas may not always have the bright yellow blush we are used to. However the eating quality will be unaffected. Prices will remain higher than normal due to the drop in supply but we expect the price to level out in the coming weeks,” Mr Batycki said.

Leaf vegetables supply may be affected for months

“In Victoria's Werribee area, leaf vegetable products have been severely affected and supply will be low for up to eight weeks. We have some supplies of leaf vegetables from our farmers in other regions, but supply will be interrupted and prices higher than normal for a couple of months.

“Broccoli and cauliflower have been hard hit by the heat and we are seeing some evidence of this with yellowing and browning of the vegetables. However, we have some alternative supply coming from Tasmania,” Mr Batycki said.

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Stonefruits in short supply

“Supply of stonefruits will be short with farmers being unable to pick crops due to the extreme heat conditions. When temperatures subside supply should continue for the balance of the season and prices should stabilise,” Mr Batycki said.

Apples discoloured and pears burnt

“Early season Gala Apples have been affected by the heat resulting in a paler colour fruit. William Pears have also experienced slight sun-burning on the skin and we expect the season to finish earlier. Eating quality will not be affected and customers can buy with confidence,” Mr Batycki said.

Strawberries in tight supply

“Strawberries have been severely affected by the heat and will be in very short supply for up to eight weeks,” Mr Batycki said.

Tomatoes ripening faster

“The heat is affecting the quality and colour of tomatoes. Consumers can expect to see full coloured tomatoes that are a little softer than usual therefore we suggest consumers buy daily. Eating quality will be excellent and full flavoured. Prices of tomatoes are expected to increase in the marketplace,” Mr Batycki said.

Potatoes appearance affected

“Potatoes grown in Victoria and South Australia regions have experienced the affects of extreme heat. The skin will appear much darker and more spotted than normal, but as potatoes are generally peeled before use, this will not affect the eating quality,” Mr Batycki said.

Farmers need our ongoing support

“Our farmers in Queensland and Victoria are experiencing disasters that are worlds apart but they all need our ongoing support. Woolworths will continue to work with our farmers to sell what product we can in our stores to ensure stock does not go to waste. While some product may have cosmetic damage it is still high in quality and taste on the inside,” Mr Batycki said.

Woolworths is also committed to supporting affected families and communities directly affected by the floods and fires. Woolworths has donated \$1million dollars to the Red Cross Bushfire Appeal and \$150,000 to the Queensland Premier’s Flood Appeal.

In line with our commitment to supporting rural and regional Australia, for the third year in a row Woolworths and Safeway will also donate all profits made by our supermarkets nationwide on Friday 20 February to the Country Women's Association to help drought affected farming communities.

Ends

For further information or interviews please contact the Woolworths Press Office on (02) 8885 1033.