

'No one will ever forget this lesson'

Growers assess damage of crop-killing freeze

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Palm Beach Post
USA TODAY NETWORK

A winter onslaught set upon Florida at the end of January, with an historic whimsy and devastating brutality that dusted the frozen night with snow flurries as far south as Fort Myers, and sent a crop-killing freeze to farmers, who despaired as damaging ice grew like tumors on their plants.

At least 30 overnight low temperature records were shattered Feb. 1 from the marshy fringes of Apalachicola, which dipped to 20 degrees, to the touristy beaches of Miami, which hit 35 degrees – 27 degrees below normal.

Multiple gauges statewide measured record lows of 23 degrees, including Jacksonville, Sanford, Leesburg and Daytona Beach. Gainesville broke a record at 20 degrees. Winter Haven measured 23 degrees, also a record breaker. And West Palm Beach dropped to 30 degrees, which is the coldest temperature as measured at Palm Beach International Airport since Dec. 25, 1989, according to the National Weather Service.

"Nobody is prepared for this kind of weather," said Lake Worth Beach Tee Shirt Co. manager Jill Federico, who noted that sweatshirts have been an extra popular item the past few days. "You see the reports about it but then you think, 'It's not going to happen to us.' Then it happens to us."

Sea smoke rose in an eerie fog off the warm waters on the Atlantic side of the state. Snow flurries fell on the southwest coast, and in Jacksonville. Jacksonville last recorded pure snow on Jan. 8, 2015, although there was a wintry slush measured in January 2025.

The ethereal flickers of white in Fort Myers is the first time snow was recorded there, said National Weather Service meteorologist Matt Anderson, who is based in the Tampa office.

"We sincerely don't have accurate records of that before so we can say it's never been observed," Anderson said. "So many things have to come together



Sea smoke rose in an eerie fog off the warm waters on the Atlantic side of the state. GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

for something like this to happen. There was a very small window, and it only lasted 10 to 15 minutes or so."

Statewide, rare extreme cold warnings were issued for the night of Jan. 31, into Feb. 1, and, in some areas, extended through the night of Feb. 1. Parts of South Florida continued under a freeze warning into the morning of Feb. 2.

"We do have cold outbreaks several times a winter, but this was definitely toward the colder end," said Danny DuBois, a meteorologist in the Jacksonville NWS office.

According to the Southeast Regional Climate Center, 39 of its 46 sites that were reporting numbers as of early Feb. 2, also recorded daytime high cold temperatures.

One gauge in Tallahassee measured a high temperature on Feb. 1 of 43 degrees, which was the coldest in 86 years of records.

Punta Gorda's 50-degree high was the coldest in 103 years of records. Key West (58), Marathon (57), Fort Lauderdale (50), and Fort Pierce (47) also recorded record low peak temperatures on Feb. 1.

Christina Morton, director of communications for the Florida Fruit and

Vegetable Association, said growers did their best to protect plants from the cold, and were still assessing damage on Feb. 2.

"Despite freezing temperatures and tough conditions, our growers worked tirelessly through several nights, using every tool at their disposal to protect Florida's fruits and vegetables," she said in an email. "When I say tirelessly, I truly mean they were up all night, no sleep."

Palm Beach County is the state's number one agricultural producing county, with sugarcane and rice crops, as well as vegetables that grow in the normally subtropical winter temperatures when other states are too cold.

But vast areas of valuable muck farmland experienced several hours of freezing temperatures Jan. 31 and Feb. 1, said Ryan Duffy, senior director of corporate communications for US Sugar. He said growers are just beginning to assess the damage.

David Hill, owner of Southern Hill Farms in Lake County, said he expects that the freezing temperatures dealt a costly blow to agriculture statewide after an often used strategy to preserve plants backfired.

Depending on forecast conditions,

growers will sometimes run overhead irrigation to create a thin layer of ice on plants that acts as insulation.

But overnight, Jan. 31 into Feb. 1, Hill watched the ice grow and grow on blueberry bushes so that the plants got too heavy and broke off. Even worse, some bushes toppled onto irrigation pipes, breaking them.

"We took baseball bats and would go to each pipe and beat the ice on the bush until it broke the ice off the bush and the pipe," Hill said. "That was nuts, but that's what state we were in. People that ran the water, did more damage than good."

Hill said he had more success with getting a thin coating of ice on fields Feb. 1 into Feb. 2 because the winds were lighter, but still thinks he lost the first half of the blueberry crop. The blooms on his peaches are also probably gone, as well as 35% of his sunflowers. But his broccoli, onions and cauliflower are more cold hardy and may come out OK.

"There are farms that lost 100%," Hill said. "There are so many things that go into the decision to run the water. This is a lesson learned. No one will ever forget this lesson."

Steve Davis, chief science officer of The Everglades Foundation, said snook, a popular sportfish, are particularly vulnerable to cold weather, as well as co-cuplum and native red mangroves, which will lose their leaves when temperatures drop.

After the 2010 cold outbreak, which included 12 days of low temperatures in the 30s and 40s south of Lake Okeechobee, the state was forced to ban snook fishing along the Gulf Coast for several years to let the population rebound.

Davis said he doesn't think the cold temperatures will be enough to completely rid the Everglades and urban areas of cold adverse invasive species.

"It is worth noting this is a significant cold event for South Florida," Davis said. "It will effect the ecology of the system, we just don't know the full extent of it at this time."

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Trump attacking pillars of democracy, group says

Daphne Psaledakis
REUTERS

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump has attacked key pillars of U.S. democracy, Human Rights Watch warned on Feb. 4 in its annual report, citing the Republican president's immigration crackdown, threats to voting rights and other policies.

Human Rights Watch Executive Director Philippe Bolopion said global democracy was now back at 1985 levels, according to some metrics. He said Russia, China and the United States were all less free than 20 years ago, and 72% of the world's population was now living under autocracy.

"It's actually incredible to see how the Trump administration has really undermined all the pillars of U.S. democracy, all the checks and balances on power," Bolopion told reporters.

"We see a sort of very hostile environment in the U.S. and a very rapid decline of ... the quality of democracy in this country."

The White House said Human Rights Watch suffers from "Trump Derangement Syndrome" and attacked Trump even before he took office.

"President Trump has done more for human rights than this Soros-funded, left-wing group ever could by ending eight wars, saving countless lives, protecting religious freedom, ending Biden's weaponization of government, and more," White House spokesperson Anna Kelly said in a statement.

Billionaire financier and major Democratic donor George Soros founded Open Society Foundations, which has given grants to organizations including Human Rights Watch.

Bolopion also said in the report that the Trump administration had leaned on racist tropes and "embraced policies and rhetoric that align with white nationalist ideology."

He criticized what he said was degrading treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers, the killing of two people in Minneapolis, and the deportation of hundreds of migrants to a mega-prison in El Salvador known for its harsh conditions, among other ele-



President Donald Trump has said he should get the Nobel Peace Prize.

EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/REUTERS

ments of Trump's crackdown.

Masked immigration officers, often in tactical military-style gear, have become a common sight across the United States and protests have erupted in several cities.

Human Rights Watch also cited strikes on suspected drug boats and criticized Trump for turning Venezuela over to President Nicolas Maduro's deputy after his capture, which Bolopion told reporters in a news conference was "risking a new human rights disaster."

Trump has said he should get the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to broker peace in a number of global conflicts.

Human Rights Watch was skeptical, saying he had downplayed serious human rights violations by Russia in Ukraine, done nothing to stop atrocities in Sudan, and failed to pressure the Israeli government to stop crimes in Gaza, where Human Rights Watch has accused Israel of committing genocide and extermination. Israel has repeatedly rejected any accusation of genocide.

Elsewhere, the report said Chinese authorities systematically denied freedom of expression, freedom of religion and other rights, while Russia had further intensified a crackdown on dissent. But in 2026 "the fight for the future of human rights will play out most sharply in the U.S., with consequences for the rest of the world," Bolopion said.



Artemy Ostanin stands behind a glass wall in an enclosure for defendants during a court hearing in Moscow on Feb. 4. ANASTASIA BARASHKOVA/REUTERS

Russian comedian gets nearly 6-year sentence

Andrew Osborn
REUTERS

MOSCOW – A Russian stand-up comedian was convicted of inciting hatred and jailed for nearly six years on Feb. 4 over a joke he made about a legless war veteran, which triggered outrage among nationalists and military bloggers.

A Reuters reporter in court said that the comedian, Artemy Ostanin, had been handed a sentence of five years and nine months and a fine of \$3,908.

It was the latest in a series of rulings which have harshly punished people judged by the authorities to have spoken rudely or falsely about the Russian army at a time when it is fighting in Ukraine.

Ostanin was also convicted of offending the feelings of Christians with another off-color joke he made about Jesus, which angered Orthodox nationalists.

His arrest and treatment were punishment enough for any offense he had caused, Ostanin said during his trial.

Russia passed sweeping censorship laws in 2022 shortly after it went to war in Ukraine. Pro-Kremlin figures and organizations have since publicly de-

nounced people they deem to have broken those laws, and have reported them to the authorities.

Ostanin's problems began after he performed in front of a small audience in March 2025 and joked about an impoverished war veteran.

Ostanin was not a household name at the time and a video of the moment he told the joke's punchline showed a panel of four fellow comedians remaining straight-faced as the sound of several audience members laughing rang out.

But video of the joke was seized upon by war bloggers and nationalists on the Telegram social media app, causing it to go viral with critics accusing Ostanin of crossing a line by crassly mocking veterans who were risking their lives on the battlefield.

Sorok Sorokov, a powerful Orthodox nationalist group, said many Russians had not understood that times had changed and that the state should tighten its control over such performances to stem what it called a general decline in moral values.

Asked by the judge on Feb. 4 whether he understood his sentence, Ostanin said: "To hell with your judicial practice. No, I don't."