

## Florida Farmers Struggle with NAFTA's Effects

**G.B. Crawford:** The North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, has created serious challenges for Florida vegetable growers. Implemented in 1994, the trade pact was intended to stimulate the flow of goods and services across the borders of the United States, Canada and Mexico. But since its adoption, Florida farmers have lost substantial portions of the U.S. vegetable market.

John VanSickle, a food and resource economist at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, said the results have been exemplified by what has happened with tomatoes.

**John VanSickle:** "You can see it in tomatoes better than in others because it is such an important crop in terms of volume and value in Florida agriculture. Our crop is...less than half the value it was when we go back prior to NAFTA being implemented."

**Crawford:** VanSickle explained that a glaring omission in the agreement has cost Florida farmers dearly.

**VanSickle:** "Labor has become a critical point. It's the part of the agreement that got left out. As long as Mexico can employ the labor in Mexico for about 10 percent of the value that we have to put into play in the U.S., it's going to be very difficult for us to compete."

**Crawford:** The lack of a reliable, functional guest worker program magnifies the impact of the differential labor cost, Van Sickle said. Unless this issue can be addressed, the trend of market share losses will continue.

**VanSickle:** "Immigration just adds to the difficulty we've got. Because as we close our borders to immigration, it's also going to increase the cost of our labor that we use in the production system."

This is G.B. Crawford for Florida Farm Bureau's *Newsline*.