Louisiana peach crop survived rains, farmers say

By The Associated Press

RUSTON — April's deluges and hailstorms haven't destroyed the May peach crop, several farmers say.

"The peach crop looks pretty good, despite all the rain and a little hail damage we have been receiving lately," said J.E. Mitcham in Ruston. "We've had a lot of problems with insects and fungus, due to not being able to spray the peaches because of the rain."

Mitcham, who has been growing peaches and watermelons on 150 acres for more than 40 years, is "looking forward to the festival this month."

"We're preparing for the festival, but the scheduled festival is too early, so the best peaches won't be on exhibit," Mitcham said.

The peach festival, sponsored by the Ruston Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, begins Friday and runs through June 16.

Coordinator and sponsor Sue Edmonds hopes that there will be a bigger turnout than last year.

"Last year, 40,000 people attended the festival, so this year we're expecting at least 50,000," Edmonds said.

"The orchards were a little hurt by the rain and hail," said Edmonds. "Small amounts of hail did destroy the crops. The cling peach cling to the seed, receiving minor damage because the storm knocked the peaches off of the tree. But the free-stone peach wasn't damaged, so those peaches are probably the ones that will be entered in the peach tasting exhibit."

E.E. Leeloe, peach crop grower in Arcadia, has been growing peaches for nine years. Leeloe also expects good crops this year. "Expecting good crops is optimism," said Leeloe. "I sell 200-300 bushels and can't spray the crops because it rains all of the time."

But John Savage said that for the third year in a row he has lost his crop to bad weather. Freezing weather killed the peaches last year and the year before. This year, he said, hail destroyed 90 percent of his seven-year-old trees.

"I have four acres of orchards and hardly any peaches, thanks to the freeze and the hail I received this year," said Savage. "The freeze got 50 percent of my orchards last year and year before last 100 percent."

"The rain destroyed the orchards also, but what's left the hail destroyed," Savage said.