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Liers can expect rising food prices from Midwest floods

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As the torrent of floodwaters continues to drench Midwest fields and inundate crops, it seems about the only thing left above the high-water mark are food prices, expected to rise further on Long Island in response to the disaster in the next six months, according to area agricultural experts and others in the food distribution industry.

Although prices are relatively stable now, and some may even go temporarily lower as now pastureless animals are slaughtered and glut meat markets, future prices are predicted to rise, said Joe Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau, based in Calverton. The new round of price increases for meat and dairy products is expected to add to the financial stress many Long Islanders are already feeling.

"I don't think that there's much we're going to be able to do," Gergela said of the prices. "We as a society have to get used to it and adjust."

"Right now prices are still fairly good," said Joe Ronzo, manager of the Uncle Giuseppe's market in Port Washington, "It all depends on supply and demand." He anticipates increases as a result of the floods, saying, "We're absolutely expecting it, there's no doubt.

"It could be like totally crazy," Ronzo continued. "You could possibly see prices double on some items."

Ronzo called the Midwest floods and rising fuel costs a "double whammy" for customers, and suggested that consumers plan a menu before they shop.

According to the Farm Bureau's Web site, local produce, consisting of potatoes, sweet corn, tomatoes, apples, berries and melons, accounts for roughly 2 percent of in-store product on Long Island, and is not nearly enough to offset the flood disaster.

Rising prices are particularly difficult for lower-income Long Islanders.

"Our phones are ringing like crazy," said Randi Shubin Dresner, president and chief executive of Island Harvest, a hunger relief organization that distributes food to other area nonprofits.

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"The floods are happening at a time when we're already seeing rising costs at the supermarkets and at the gas stations, she said. "At this point in time, people are already being stretched."

The recent Midwest floods engulfed an estimated 2 million acres of corn and soybean fields in Iowa, Indiana, Illinois and other key growing states. The government will give a partial idea of how many corn acres were lost before the end of the month, but experts say the trickle-down effect could be more dramatic later this year, affecting everything from Thanksgiving turkeys to Christmas hams.

Corn's prices were already rising before the floods, driven up 80 percent over the past year as developing countries such as China and India scramble for grains to feed people and livestock. U.S. production of ethanol, an alternative fuel that can be made with corn, has also pushed prices higher, prompting livestock owners to lobby Washington to roll back ethanol mandates.

Before the floods, corn farmers were enjoying record profits selling the grain to feed animals and for use in cereals and as a sweetener in soda and candy. But a sharply smaller corn crop could wipe out those gains.

This story was supplemented with an Associated Press report.

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