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Cold Winter Leads to Soaring Heating Demand; Peaches and Blueberries in Danger of Spring Freeze Damage.

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Athens, Ga. - An extremely cold first half of climatological winter has resulted in soaring heating demand across Georgia. The cold weather also means that peaches and blueberries are very susceptible to a spring freeze. The El Niño winter pattern is expected to continue with below normal temperatures and above normal precipitation.

Through the first half of climatological winter, which began December 1, Georgians have experienced abnormally cold and wet weather. This cold weather has led to a very high heating demand.

For the first half of winter, December 1 through January 15, inclusive, heating demand has ranged from 19% to 43% above normal at Savannah and Alma, respectively. Between January 1 and 15, inclusive, heating demand has ranged from 41% to 93% above normal at Athens and Alma, respectively.

Across the piedmont, heating demand for the first half of winter has been 30% above normal for Atlanta and 25% above normal for Athens. Compared to last year, heating demand for the first half of winter is 60% higher for Atlanta and 51% higher for Athens.

In middle Georgia, heating demand for the first half of winter has been 39% above normal for Columbus, 28% for Macon and 24% for Augusta. Compared to last year, heating demand for the first half of winter is 78% higher for Columbus, 80% higher for Macon, and 87% higher for Augusta.

South Georgia heating demand for the first half of winter is 19% above normal for Savannah, 27% for Brunswick, and 43% for Alma. Compared to last year, heating demand for the first half of winter is 82% higher for Savannah, 99% higher for Brunswick, and 83% higher for Alma.

For the first half of January, heating demand across all of Georgia was even greater than for the winter as a whole. This means that January heating bills are expected to be much higher

that last year.

For the first half of January heating demand for Atlanta was 53% higher than normal and 101% higher than last year. For Athens, heating demand for the first half of January was 41% higher than normal and 73% higher than last year.

The heating demand pattern for the first half of January was the same across middle and south Georgia. For Columbus the heating demand was 72% higher than normal and 137% higher than last year. Macon experience 58% higher than normal heating demand and 125% higher compared to last year. While Augusta experienced 52% higher heating demand compared to normal and 106% higher compared to last year.

Across south Georgia, heating demand for the first half of January was 59% higher than normal and 144% higher than last year at Savannah. For Brunswick, heating demand was 80% higher than normal and 184% higher than last year. Alma's heating demand was 93% above normal and 139% higher than last year.

Because of the extended cold spell, chill-hours have accumulated rapidly across the state. Chill-hours for the season are in excess of 800 across much of middle and south Georgia. This means that many varieties of peaches and blueberries have reached or are near the number of chill-hours needed to break dormancy.

Because peaches and blueberries have accumulated or are near accumulating the chill-hours necessary to break dormancy, any extended period of temperatures in the 70's could result in flowering. If early flowering occurs, peaches and blueberries will be very susceptible to a late winter or spring freeze.

Producers are encouraged to take appropriate action to protect their crops from a possible freeze.

The El Niño winter pattern is expected through March with below normal temperatures and above normal precipitation. There is an increased risk of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes through the spring. Tornadoes in late January and February are not unusual in Georgia. These tornadoes can form anytime, day or night.

Agricultural fields are expected to remain near saturation through March. Late winter and spring field work is expected to be delayed.

The continuation of wet soils mean that flood risk is enhance statewide.

It is not unusual for an extended dry period to follow an El Niño

winter with dryness beginning in the middle of spring.

Updated weather information, including chill-hours, may be found from UGA's network of automated weather stations at www.georgiaweather.net

(David Emory Stooksbury is the state climatologist and a professor of engineering and atmospheric sciences in the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)