

LOCAL

The supply chain is eating up random items at Greenville grocery stores, here's why

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Need toilet paper and canned foods? Not a problem.

But cream cheese and frozen fries may be harder to find. Or maybe it'll be bananas or carrots, or maybe not.

Shoppers at grocery stores across Greenville County have noticed random items missing from the shelves.

Despite the periodic food scarcity, shoppers can expect to see more normalcy after the omicron variant passes, according to Anna Nagurney, department chair in integrated studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. .

The shortages, she said, show "how important people and labor are to supply chain issues."

Linda Knauer, of Powdersville, altered her big batches of homemade Chex Mix for Christmas when she couldn't find Bugles despite searching at four grocery stores.

"It's those odd things that seem to be short the most often from what we've noticed," Knauer said.

The Aldi on Worley Street in Greenville was well stocked Thursday, but out of Vienna sausages.

The Ingles on Cherrydale had no obvious shortages. There were some empty shelves where there should have been cream cheese, toilet paper and paper towels at the Publix near Furman University.

And the Tomato Vine roadside market on Old Buncombe Road was low on bananas and carrots, but not empty.

It varies from day to day or even more often.

On Thursday morning, the Food Lion on West Wade Hampton Boulevard in Greer had huge gaps in its produce, meat and deli sections.

In the produce section, there were empty spaces where there are usually apples, strawberries and lettuce. A section for packaged salad kits was mostly empty, along with a sign crediting a recent recall.

Seafood and meat freezers were also either sparse or bare of some products. Different kinds of tilapia were out, a white sign above the meat freezers said the store was experiencing challenges with meat producers and preparing for winter weather.

It asked that customers limit meat purchases to two and apologized for any inconvenience.

And while certain items were out, plenty of other items were well-stocked.

Here's why grocery store shelves don't have some things

The current supply chain problems are bouncing off each other, part of a not-so-normal world, according to experts.

What's promising to the experts is that a number of the shortages could get better soon.

"To get things from a manufacturer to a store, there's a long lead time involved in that often," said Keith Skowronski, an assistant professor of management science at the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business.

The winter storms in South Carolina — in the Upstate two weeks ago and the Midlands last week — accounted for some of the missing shelf items and just as the seasons pass, so will many of those shortages, he said.

"Things will get back to normal at some point," Skowronski said.

A big reason is employees, said Anna Nagurney, department chair in integrated studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

She said labor, trucking, shipping and international imports are the big reasons when shelves are empty, including a 50 percent shortage in grocery store workers.

There are missing people in each sector, Nagurney said.

- 80,000 short in trucking laborer shortages
- 13,000 short in meat packing industry shortages
- 12,000 short in bakery worker shortages
- 8,000 short in beverage employee shortages

In a recent study by business consultancy KPMG, 71% of grocery consumers said they were somewhat or very concerned about shortages or empty shelves with 35% switching brands when their favorite items are out of stock.

The grocery industry has a lot of moving parts — suppliers, distributors, retailers, shippers. Those parts don't always communicate perfectly so that can lead to one store having bananas but not peppers and another one nearby being the opposite, said Yoni Mazer, co-founder of New Jersey-based GETIGA, a data analytics firm, in a statement.

He said the coordination issues can lead to "strange local product shortages," made worse by factors like inflation and a long reliance on a just-in-time shipping model. Just-in-time shipping led to smaller stock rooms in the back and made grocery stores stockpiles often the shelves themselves.

Grocery stores around the Upstate were asked about specific and overall shortages.

A spokesman for Publix said, in an email, that the supply chain is under a lot of stress.

He said there are product and labor shortages, high demand, a record amount of exporting food, shipping constraints and inflation.

"We continue to maintain constant communication with our suppliers," Jared Glover, media relations manager for the Charlotte division of Publix, "however, various product lines may be out of stock in assorted categories."

Food Lion's president, Meg Ham, said in a November statement following a White House meeting that overall food supply lines remain strong but there would be some specific supply chain issues for some products.

Grocery store shoppers should alter their expectations before grabbing a shopping cart, Nagurney said.

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To cope with empty shelves, Nagurney recommends to think strategically, be adaptable and willing to go to other stores or even go without.

Most importantly, she said, shoppers should keep a positive attitude when hitting the aisles of the stores they know the best.

There are the other occasional issues that will explain low produce and missing shelf items, such as a recent lettuce recall, seasonal shortages and irregular winter storms across the East Coast.

Our local supermarkets do not differ from what is happening nationwide, Skowronski said.

Consumers have a heightened urgency to stockpile items, like with the toilet paper shortages of 2020, he said.

The more that people avoid the temptation to hoard, the better it will be, Skowronski said.

"Sometimes there's going to be stock outs," he said. "But people need to try and not change their buying habits. Hoarding is bad."

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