

## Dry weather, spring freeze cost local farmers millions

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
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LAKE COUNTY &ndash; Little rain coupled with freezing spring temperatures have resulted in millions of dollars of damage for county farmers. {sidebar id=86}

County Agricultural Commissioner Steve Hajik said his staff has collected information from farmers and ranchers as part of a damage survey to see how agriculture was impacted by adverse spring conditions.

Total damages for top crops amount to just under \$18 million, according to numbers Hajik supplied.

From March to May, the county only had 0.6 inches of rain, he said.

He said the county is in a drought, and has been in February, with stock ponds and rangeland drying up.

Drought combined with &ldquo;one of the coldest Aprils in a long time&rdquo; hit the county's top four crops &ndash; grapes, pears, nursery and cattle &ndash; hard, according to Hajik.

In terms of potential dollar losses, the survey shows that pears were impacted by 35 to 40 percent, with an estimated \$12.1 million in total losses for farmers, Hajik said.

&ldquo;We're not sure if we've reached all the damage yet,&rdquo; he said, explaining that they're still monitoring for more possible damage to the trees themselves.

Losses on the amount of fruit could be made up for if the remaining fruit is larger, said Hajik, which would bring more in the fresh fruit market.

The county's top crop, winegrapes, had a 35-percent damage estimate, amounting to just over \$3 million, said Hajik.

However, that estimate could change because the grapes can sometimes come back in a second bud.

&ldquo;Of everything we've surveyed, grapes are the most uncertain,&rdquo; he said.

Walt Lyon of Kelseyville said he saw losses in his 70 acres of winegrapes, but secondary buds were definitely showing up.

&ldquo;They are coming back,&rdquo; he said. &ldquo;I was pleasantly surprised with some, and kinda disappointed with others.&rdquo;

Some winegrape blocks had serious damage, others didn't, Lyon explained. He said it likely will be harvest time before he can know for certain how much damage was done.

Although not a top 4 crop, hay also was damaged significantly, said Hajik. The county's 2,200 hay-producing acres are expected to issue less than half a crop, amounting to \$1.6 million in losses.

Tim Strong, president of the Lake County Cattlemen's Association, said hay fields planted in the fall fared better, but spring hay plantings were very poor, producing at less than 50 percent. His own 100 acre of hay only averaged a 40-percent yield.

&ldquo;The quality of the hay is pretty good, but the quantity is way down,&rdquo; he said.

Some farmers just gave up and disked the crops into the ground or let animals graze on them because the yields were so low, Strong said.

The county's walnuts saw a significant loss, said Hajik, with 70-percent of the crop believed lost due to the frosts, amounting to just over \$1 million for farmers.

&ldquo;The walnuts were at bloom stage, so obviously the blooms failed and there's going to be no walnuts for those trees,&rdquo; he said, adding that some young trees also died.

The county's 90,000 acres of rangeland are estimated to be at between 50 and 60 percent of normal, said Hajik, with damage from lack of water amounting to \$138,240 in damages, Hajik said.

Those losses were calculated by looking at the need for supplemental feed and early herd sell-offs, which resulted in cattlemen not getting top dollar for their animals, he said.

John Harper, the University of California Cooperative Extension livestock and natural resources advisor for Lake and Mendocino counties, said rangeland conditions in the area are poor.

&ldquo;The freeze slowed the growth down of the grasses as well,&rdquo; he said.

That has given rise to a &ldquo;pretty droughty situation,&rdquo; following last year, which wasn't great for precipitation, either, Harper said.

&ldquo;I'd say it's probably worse than last year,&rdquo; he said.

Strong agreed that conditions are serious.

&ldquo;It's very dry,&rdquo; he said. &ldquo;It's probably the driest March and April we've had.&rdquo;

The really cold weather hit the young grass on the range, he said. In addition, winter rangelands depend on rainfall to fill stock ponds, which didn't happen because there was no rain.

&ldquo;It's absolutely, 100 percent, no doubt that this is a disaster for California rangelands,&rdquo; Strong said.

Cattlemen are having to go to summer pastures early, said Strong. &ldquo;Which means we'll have problems this fall in extending the grazing season.&rdquo;

The cattle have done OK, said Strong, but ranchers have had to supplement poor grass abundance with feed.

&ldquo;It's not only a loss of feed, then you have to supplement more, so the cost of production is greatly increased,&rdquo; he said.

Hay prices also are going up &ndash; with alfalfa in the Central Valley bringing in more than \$250 a ton, he said.

Strong said he expects to see applications for help from the Farm Service Agency going up.

Hajik said he plans to apply for a disaster declaration through state and federal agricultural agencies. That usually results in low-interest loans made available to farmers and ranchers.

The last time the government made grants available was in 2003, he said, when cattlemen were hit hard by drought.

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