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Calif. lawmakers seek aid for citrus freeze, other disasters

By Michael Doyle

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WASHINGTON - California lawmakers on Wednesday formally asked for more than \$1.2 billion to help farmers and workers hurt by natural disasters including last month's freeze.

The package introduced on Capitol Hill offers an unusually generous array of grants, relief checks and more. The bill is still fluid, with further revisions certain.

"We've come together to make sure we can make California whole again," Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer said.

Boxer and the San Joaquin Valley's bipartisan array of House members crafted the 16-page bill in recent weeks. They hope to attach it to emergency supplemental funding legislation, with the assistance of Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

In some important ways, they broke the mold used for standard farm disaster relief bills.

California farmers, for instance, could secure up to \$125,000 in compensation for crop losses. Typically, Congress limits emergency payments to \$80,000. The payment limit is one likely area for future negotiations with lawmakers from other states, though Californians insist more money is necessary.

"Just the cost of producing specialty crops in California tends to be higher," California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura explained.

Kawamura this week met with White House officials, urging them to have President Bush declare the San Joaquin Valley a disaster area. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns has already done so, freeing up low-interest loans. A presidential declaration would make additional unemployment and food assistance available.

"It should be forthcoming," Kawamura said of the presidential declaration, "but time is important."

Boxer leapt to the lead in writing the freeze relief bill, to the surprise of some House members. Feinstein, a detail-oriented legislator, has periodically cautioned San Joaquin Valley officials that there are limits to what Congress can do.

However it's worked out, though, the two senators have adopted complementary roles. Boxer helped drive the relief legislation, while Feinstein's seat on the Senate Appropriations Committee enables her to work on the larger emergency supplemental funding bill to which the California relief will be attached.

The congressional relief bill goes beyond damages from last month's freeze. It also covers California farmers hurt by flooding in 2005 and a bad heat wave in 2006.

"It should put forth enough money to be helpful," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif.

There will be pressure to make it even bigger. Already, other California lawmakers are urging that funds be provided to assist beleaguered Pacific Coast salmon fishermen. Saying yes to them could open the door to other requests.

As it now stands, the California relief bill offers \$420 million for citrus growers and \$438 million for other specialty crop growers. An additional \$400 million is provided for crop damages from 2006, and \$100 million for 2005 damages.

The price tag grows higher still, with \$230 million for dairy producers and \$80 million for livestock producers.

Uninsured citrus growers would be limited to reimbursement for losses of up to 35 percent of their crop. This is supposed to avoid rewarding the minority of farmers who have declined to buy crop insurance. In theory, Congress wants crop insurance to be how farmers get help during natural disasters. In practice, it doesn't work out that way, as Congress annually passes ad hoc disaster bills.

"Crop insurance has been competing ... with direct assistance and loan programs that have received larger amounts of federal funds and have had more attractive terms for farmers," auditors with the Government Accountability Office warned 17 years ago.

Low-income migrant and seasonal farm workers could receive emergency grants under the bill, though the legislation does not specify the amount. The bill is silent on the issue of whether illegal immigrants can be assisted, though California officials already have stated they expect to help everyone who needs it.

Farm workers in both California and Arizona could also receive federal help with their mortgage payments.

"We have people who are really one paycheck away from being thrown out of their homes," Boxer said.

Federal funds would support \$250,000 grants to small farm-related businesses hurt by the freeze's ripple effects. These are businesses with less than \$15 million in annual revenue, 75 percent of which must be related to agriculture.

"Obviously, this is a work in progress," noted Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif.