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HURRICANE KATRINA | AGRICULTURE

South Dade growers ask for state, federal relief

With more than \$400 million in crop losses and job losses estimated at almost 3,000 workers, South Dade growers call for disaster relief and unemployment aid.

BY JANE BUSSEY

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As an official delegation trudged through damaged nurseries and groves littered with downed fruit trees Tuesday, South Miami-Dade growers pressed their demand for state and federal help to recover from Hurricane Katrina.

"It was a hell of a hurricane," said Arturo DeLeon, owner of DeLeon Farms. "We need the help not only for the migrant people but for the farmers themselves."

Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles H. Bronson, who led the inspection tour, promised growers their voices would be heard: "I'm going to be asking very loudly, I'm going to be asking the governor to be asking very loudly, and I'm sure other states are going to be doing the same thing.

"So we'll all be asking for help from the federal government," he said.

Congress must approve any federal disaster relief for stricken areas. But Bronson said he would look into ways to locate state funds, working with lawmakers and the governor in Tallahassee.

Farmers in hurricane-ravaged areas of Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, as well as those in the drought-stricken Midwest, are all clamoring for federal relief.

In Miami-Dade County, Katrina dropped 12 to 16 inches of rainfall and flooded fields, ripped apart shade houses that protect fragile ornamental foliage and caused an estimated \$427 million in crop losses.

Federal and local agencies issued new estimates for the cost of the hurricane, placing the overall economic impact of farm losses at \$627 million and warning that as many as 2,800 agricultural workers may lose their jobs.

OUT OF WORK

At Superior Foliage in Homestead, agronomist Jacqueline Balmaceda told reporters that 10 to 15 people had come by Monday and Tuesday looking for work.

"A lot of them are coming here to ask for work because many of the small nurseries just closed down," Balmaceda said. "What I want is to save the jobs of the people who work here."

The first stop on the tour, arranged by the Dade County Farm Bureau and county and state agriculture officials, was Miami Agra-Starts, an ornamental plant nursery in Homestead, owned by siblings Sally and Jim Stribling.

Sally Stribling stood next to a flattened shade house strewn with overturned pots of ficus that were quickly dying in the burning sun.

"When we built this structure in 1995, we spared no expense. We used the highest grade of cable, the highest grade of telephone poles," she said.

"It was considered to be one of the strongest shade house structures really in the industry down here. And virtually every telephone pole is snapped off at the base."

Stribling said that the nursery would save money if county officials would ease rules and allow growers to burn ruined plant material rather than transporting it to a dumpster or a landfill.

INSURANCE

Growers also wanted federal disaster relief to help pay for hefty deductibles on federal crop insurance. In some cases, the deductibles range from 35 percent to 50 percent of claims. Damages to shade houses or green houses are not covered by federal crop insurance.

"I am surprised at the damage we have seen here today, especially the structural damage that we have seen in the shade houses," said U.S. Department of Agriculture District Director Steve Berk.

Katrina's torrential rains and flooding brought the threat of root rot and other plant diseases caused by water under the surface of fields. A final estimate of crop losses may not be available for another week.

"The ag business in a tough business, but we're a tough bunch," said Bobby Lee, president of Superior Foliage. He said he had no plans to move despite the constant challenges to farming from flooding, hurricanes, frost and pests.

"This is what I do for a living, I've been doing it for 20 years."



PROTECTING THEIR LIVELIHOOD: Migrant workers Anthony Rivero, left, and Glendy Leticia Perez collect plants that weren't damaged by Hurricane Katrina on Tuesday at Superior Foliage nursery in the Homestead area.



PROMISED AID: Agriculture Secretary Charles Bronson tours a South Dade nursery.



UPROOTED: Potted plants at Miami Agra-Starts, an ornamental plant nursery in Homestead, were part of the damage viewed by state officials Tuesday. NURI VALLBONA/HERALD STAFF