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HURRICANE AID

Farmers to divvy up \$200M in storm aid

The U.S. Department of Agriculture will provide \$200 million to Florida farmers and growers hit hard by storms.

BY PHIL LONG

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Florida farmers pummeled by Hurricane Wilma and other storms this year will be dividing up about \$200 million in U.S. Department of Agriculture relief money, state and federal officials said Tuesday.

But the damage totals at least \$2 billion, state agriculture leaders say.

So Florida farmers and growers still have work to do in the halls of Congress when the new year starts if they want more hurricane relief, they say.

The \$200 million is from emergency funds that will be administered by the Department of Agriculture.

Recipients include almost every kind of grower who suffered damage, but no details were available Tuesday about how the money will be distributed.

"We're going to continue to fight for more funds," said Omar Franco, spokesman for U.S. Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart, a Miami-Dade Republican who was one of several legislators involved in getting the funds.

"Given the catastrophic damage in Mississippi and Louisiana, I am pleased we have been able to get some much-needed disaster relief in Florida," state Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson said in a release Tuesday.

The money will go for projects like debris removal, cleaning out canals and ditches to prevent flooding, and compensating farmers for a portion of their crop losses, Bronson said.

Citrus growers in Palm Beach and Martin counties lost 80 percent of their crops because the fruit was so mature and heavy when the Oct. 24 storm hit, said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League, a trade organization representing many of the state's fresh fruit growers.