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AGRICULTURE

Gov., agriculture chief call for federal farm relief

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Gov. Jeb Bush got an up-close view Thursday afternoon of what is left of Kerry's Bromeliad Nursery in the Redland -- very little.

Raising his hand to shield his eyes from a blazing sun, Bush surveyed rows of dead or dying tropical plants at the 56-acre nursery. He turned to owner Kerry Herndon.

"Is there anything that can be saved?" Bush asked.

"No," said Herndon's wife, Nancy Harter, who responded before Bush could finish his question.

Herndon shrugged. "When the sun comes out, it doesn't take long for [the plants] to go," he said.

More than two weeks after Hurricane Wilma tore through a large swath of South Florida, Bush and Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson made their final stop on their tour of agricultural areas devastated by the storm.

Statewide, agriculture industry losses caused by four hurricanes in Florida this year are estimated at \$2.2 billion. That figure is up slightly from the \$2.1 billion in losses during the four hurricanes that hit Florida in 2004.

Bronson estimated that Wilma's losses alone would total about \$1.3 million.

Damage to South Dade agriculture from Wilma is estimated at \$217.6 for tropical fruits, avocados and other crops, and \$31.5 million in buildings. Herndon's operation sustained about \$28 million in damaged greenhouses and a 100 percent loss of plants.

Viewing the acres of broken greenhouses and yards of ripped protective covering spread on the nearby roadside, Bush said he was struck by the magnitude of the losses.

"I'm getting a feel for the scope of the devastation," Bush said.

LARGER FARMS

The governor called for the federal government to make available financial assistance to larger farm operations, which are vital to state agriculture. He said that current grants and low-interest loans are only for smaller farms.

Last year, the state received approximately \$400 million in commitments to offset losses, Bush said. None of it went to larger farms.

Bush said state financial assistance would be discussed during a special legislative session in Tallahassee next month.

"We've got some severe issues around the state, not just in the nursery business but also in sugar cane, commercial fishing in the Keys, fresh vegetables, fresh citrus, these storms spread canker," Bush said. "The agriculture section has been devastated over the last 14 months."

To enlist the Florida delegation in pushing for federal assistance, Bronson and agricultural industry representatives traveled to Capitol Hill earlier this week.

KATRINA PACKAGE

They want relief funds to be folded into legislation to compensate damage caused by Hurricane Katrina.

No concrete promises yet, Bronson said, but he's hopeful. "They understand the losses are staggering," he said. "With their help, we'll make progress."

Bronson also met with major commodity growers in Clewiston, the heart of sugar and citrus country and headquarters of the U.S. Sugar Corp., on Nov. 1 and shared the latest state and federal estimates on Florida crop, livestock and infrastructure damage.

"Everyone agreed those were pretty accurate," said Terry McElroy, spokesman for the Florida Department of Agriculture.

Besides huge nursery and vegetable losses, the grapefruit crop is half gone and there was almost \$400 million in damages to sugar cane fields, where harvesting had just begun. Damages to the small honeybee industry were placed at \$2.5 million, but more than 5,000 colonies were lost.

After four hurricanes last year, the USDA implemented disaster programs for Florida's nurseries and citrus, vegetable and sugar industries.

"We realize that with Katrina and all the aid going to New Orleans, it's going to be tougher this year," McElroy said.

But the state is looking to provide assistance to hard-hit growers as soon as possible.

Herndon said he lost millions of shade-loving orchids and bromeliads when Wilma ripped the roof off his shade houses and greenhouses on Oct. 24. Some plants were bent by violent winds; others, though, baked to death in the hot sun.

ESTIMATED AGRICULTURAL LOSSES

A wide array of Florida's agriculture sector has taken heavy hits during this hurricane season. So far crop and structural damage has totaled \$2.21 billion.

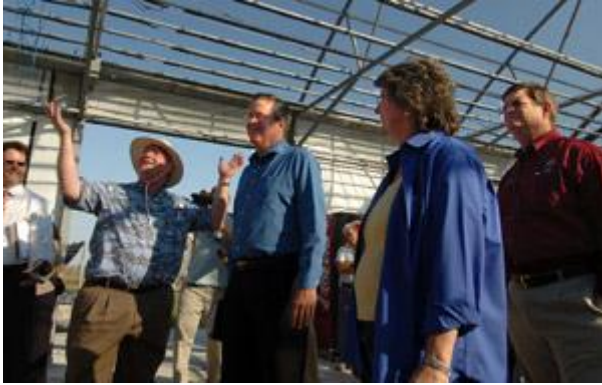
- **Nursery** -- \$1.12 billion.
- **Citrus** -- \$180 million.
- **Sugar** -- More than \$370 million.
- **Vegetables** -- \$311 million.
- **Tropical fruit** -- \$44.1 million.
- **Cotton and peanuts** -- \$23 million.
- **Tropical Aquaculture** -- \$7.6 million.
- **Stone crabs, spiny lobster, shrimp** -- \$51.7 million.

- **Beef cattle** -- \$51.1 million.

- **Poultry** -- \$567,000.

- **Honeybees** -- \$2.5 million.

Sources: USDA and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services-----



ON SITE: Kerry Herndon, second from left, talks with Gov. Jeb Bush, Herndon's wife Nancy Harter and state agriculture commissioner Charles Bronson, right.



PLANT PROBLEMS: Overturned pots and plants were only part of the damage caused by Hurricane Wilma; broken greenhouses also exposed light-sensitive plants to the harsh sun.