

Mid-Columbia

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Bills would relieve apple growers

■ *Until emergency aid OK'd growers getting 2000 funds*

By Chris Mulick

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Washington lawmakers helped introduce federal legislation Tuesday that would provide almost \$90 million in emergency relief to struggling Washington apple growers.

In the meantime, growers are supposed to be receiving checks from a \$100 million package approved last year, the first time the government has ever provided relief for apple growers.

They are making it clear they don't want

apples to become a "program crop" such as wheat, where growers receive relief on an ongoing basis.

"This request is really asking for a bridge," said Prosser's Larry Olsen, chairman of the Washington Apple Commission. "We're not asking for permanent funding. What we're asking for is some help to get through a difficult time."

Washington apple growers have lost hundreds of millions over the past four years thanks in part to low prices and a worldwide glut of apples. This year's drought won't help, either.

"We have been hammered by a number of sources, most of which are not under our control," Olsen said.

Bills introduced in the U.S. House and Senate Tuesday would seek \$250 million nationwide. The Senate version, backed in part by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., would provide about \$85 million for Washington growers. The House version, co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., would provide \$89 million.

Hastings said the passage of last year's relief should help ease the bills through Congress by raising awareness of the plight of apple growers. But Murray warned it won't be easy, considering the budget crunch due, in part, to pay for President Bush's tax cut.

"It's going to be very difficult," she said.

Both lawmakers expect the system for distributing checks to run smoother should the relief be approved. Checks were held up in red tape this year because of the change in presidential administrations.

Though some organizations wanted to ask for more than \$250 million, Olsen said the final figure incorporated others' worries that would jeopardize passage of the legislation.

"Obviously, it's not going to restore all the losses to apple growers," he said. "This isn't going to pay off everybody's bills."

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