

ADVERTISEMENT

YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

- ABOUT US**
- YHR Jobs**
- Newsroom**
- Circulation**
- Directory**
- Exec. Directory**
- History**



*Do you
have some
news?*

Farmers were cleaning up and politicians were hunting for disaster relief money Thursday, one day after a severe storm wiped out as much as a third of the state's cherry crop.

Compared to a hurricane by many, the storm brought rain, hail and limb-ripping wind that gusted as high as 70 mph. Where it hit full-force, the storm laid waste to crops in orchards and fields. In the rest of the region, it dumped enough rain to swell and split tons of cherries like cheap water balloons.

"It was sure a dark day," said Chris Schlect with the Northwest Horticultural Council. "It is a very, very significant hit. As far as storms doing damage to crops here, I would be surprised if it didn't rank in the top 10."

Reports of the storm drove U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings of Pasco to start pushing for a disaster relief package Thursday. Gov. Gary Locke, on an out-of-state vacation, was apprised of the situation and gathering reports that could lead to a disaster declaration.

The bulk of the severe damage was in the Lower Yakima Valley, where trees were shredded by golf ball-sized hail and wind gusts that hit freeway speeds. The most widespread damage was to the region's cherry crop, which was just weeks away from being fully harvested.

A third of the state's cherries had been picked by Wednesday. What was left on the trees fell victim to rain and wind.

"As much as half of the cherries that were ripe or near ripe were damaged," said Mike Bush, an agriculture extension agent in Yakima County.

More than 30 percent of the crop statewide was destroyed, Schlect and others said.

Cherries, notoriously susceptible to weather damage, had been a lucrative bright spot in Central Washington's faltering agricultural economy. The Bing variety was selling for as much as \$35 for a 20-pound box last week. The Rainier variety was worth nearly \$60 a box.

"We're done picking cherries," said orchardist Ric



third of his cherry crop this week. What's left in the trees isn't worth picking, he said.

Massive cherry losses were also reported in the Wenatchee Valley.

Boyd Scroggins, a north Wenatchee grower, said the nearly seven hours of rain Wednesday was too much for cherries, saturating them and causing them to split.

"Their skin is quite porous," he said. "It does absorb a great deal of moisture, but it can only take so much. Something has to give. It's usually the skin."

Others were luckier but not unscathed.

"If this storm had been two or three days later, we would have been ruined," said Jeff McPhee, whose unripe cherries proved resistant to the rain. McPhee, who farms 250 acres with his father in Naches, still lost about 5 percent of his cherry crop.

"We got lucky," he said.

Farmers from Parker to Prosser weren't so lucky.

"The apples and pears are a total loss," said state Rep. Bruce Chandler, a Granger Republican who has a 150-acre orchard. "When I was a kid in Louisiana, we went through several hurricanes and it was a lot like that."

Chandler also works as a field representative for Obert Cold Storage. He said growers throughout the Yakima Valley were hurt.

"It made a tough situation significantly worse," he said.

The toughest blows will fall on farmers, including most of the state's cherry growers, who hadn't insured their crops with private companies.

Brian Miller, who heads the Yakima office of the federal Farm Service Agency, was answering telephone calls all day Thursday from uninsured farmers who were wiped out by the storm.

The federal government does handle insurance for some crops, but not tree fruit.

Unless they put a crop loss disaster program in with some of the legislation that's being pursued in Congress, there's nothing we can do for them," Miller said. "Hopefully, something might become available."

That's what Hastings was working on Thursday. His office started getting reports on the storm Wednesday, and they kept coming in Thursday.

"Every call we get, they just keep getting worse and worse," said Hastings spokesman Todd Young.

The congressman fired off a letter to Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman detailing the storm.

But federal help will be contingent on Locke, whose staff was scrambling late Thursday to assess storm damage.

Locke spokeswoman Kristine Marree said the governor will decide whether to declare a disaster as soon as the assessment is done.

Schlect said farmers should not bank on federal aid until more is known. Many federal disaster-relief programs offer low-interest loans rather than cash grants, he said.

On Thursday, no one knew how much the storm cost.

It was more than just trees. County road crews and workers with Pacific Power were clearing fallen trees and toppled power poles in the Lower Valley.

"This is going to cost the county some money," said Tony Wentz, the county's director of emergency management.

State Department of Transportation crews worked through Wednesday night to reopen State Route 22 in Toppenish after it was closed by fallen power lines and trees. Other roads were closed by rain, which in some areas totaled more than an inch. Wind ripped off part of the roof of Obert Cold Storage's Granger building.

And while Pacific Power had hoped to have electrical service restored by 8 a.m. Thursday, 1,500 Lower Valley customers regained electricity by 5 p.m. after going without since the storm. About 12 customers remain without power.

"We keep running into additional problems. We've got

manager with Pacific Power.

While the Lower Valley cleaned up debris, the National Weather Service in Pendleton, Ore., was working to determine what caused the storm.

"It was a set of very unusual circumstances," said meteorologist John Denman.

A combination of heat and extreme humidity whipped a typical summer storm into a regional disaster. The cloud patterns, called mesocyclones, spun like miniature hurricanes and packed a softer but similar punch.

"It's something that's very uncommon," he said.

While the rain poured on virtually all of Central Washington, the storm's powerful center hit the Lower Valley.

The good news, if there's any, is in the Okanogan. By the time the storm reached the state's northern reaches, its power had dissipated.

"I just talked to someone in Okanogan County, and they only had 5 percent damage to their cherries," said Eric Patrick, promotions director with the state Fruit Commission. "We still have a crop here and we can't give up."

But the bad news hurts for an agricultural industry that has been bleeding red ink for the past five years, mainly due to unprofitable apple prices.

"The growers are stunned and trying to salvage what they have left," Schlect said.

©2001 All Photos, Content and Design are Properties of the:
Yakima Herald-Republic

Partners-



For questions or additional information about this site, e-mail us
at: webmaster@yakima-herald.com

or

Send your comments to:

Yakima, WA 98901
Attention: Webmaster