

Agricultural losses from hurricanes nearly \$18-million

Extension Director says commodities pricing is what is really killing farming

By JEANETTE WHITE

WINDSOR - Bertie County farmers suffered losses of almost \$18-million because of flooding from last year's hurricanes.

And U.S.D.A. Farm Service Agency (former ASCS) is getting the credit for helping those farmers begin the long trek back this year.

Cooperative Extension Service Director Billy Griffin said, "If it hadn't been for FSA, we'd have nobody farming in Bertie County this year."

Griffin said federal money is getting farmers back on their feet this growing season, but this must be a good year if growers are going to make it.

"We've got to have a good one (year). If we don't, there will be numerous farmers who will not be able to farm next year. This year will be the breaking point for Bertie County," Griffin said.

Because of falling commodity prices and increasing production costs, workers who till Bertie's soil were having a hard time even before Floyd's floodwaters.

Now it is estimated that the flooding added another \$17,879,890 to agriculture's loss.

Farmers had about 60 percent of tobacco in the field when Floyd arrived. All other fields were unharvested except a small percentage of land planted in such early crops as sage and wheat.

It is estimated that flood loss in tobacco was \$2,212,840. There was another \$5,670,489 loss in peanuts; \$5,267,028 in cotton; \$1,414,341 in corn; and \$651,880 in soybeans.

The county lost another \$2,147,262 in government payments (which are based on production); \$41,050 in livestock; and \$475,000 in machinery, dwellings, structures and land damage.

So far, growers have not received state funding to help cover losses. Farmers are hoping an 8.5 percent of loss payment from the state is imminent and hoping for another 8.5 percent later, for a total 17 percent.

Money received to date has come from federal Farm Bill funds.

Bertie FSA has received or anticipates from federal

Even though profits have been falling, the acreage is more than in years past as government support programs have died and farmers are planting from "hedgerow to hedgerow," Griffin said.

In 1999, the county had 2,258 acres of tobacco; 33,763 acres of cotton; 16,629 acres of peanuts; 17,461 acres of corn; and 16,296 of soybeans.

But even with increased

in 1996; \$15,188,014 in 1997; \$11,780,113 in 1998; and \$8,851,360 in 1999.

Cotton grossed \$20,991,425 in 1996; \$16,288,168 in 1997; \$18,379,195; in 1998; and \$7,444,521 in 1999.

Peanuts grossed \$13,575,000 in 1996; \$13,367,704 in 1997; \$14,073,167 in 1998; and \$8,231,355 in 1999.

Cotton growers in Bertie County expect a minimum of 750 pounds per acre in a normal year. Last year production fell to 500-550 per acre average.

But the flooding did not cause damage to soil which has not or will not be reversed.

Griffin says farm land is not wetter now than usual, but there is more moisture in subsoil.

Flooding caused an increase in Ph levels initially, but those levels traditionally correct themselves in about six months.

Growers must increase applications of potash, sulfur, nitrogen and boron this season to combat leaching caused by heavy volumes of water.

People are having difficulty finding good things in last year's flooding, but one good thing was the removal of salinity from county waterways.

Farmers were not able to use water last year to irrigate crops because of salinity. The growing season began wet and was followed by drought conditions, which prevented the normal push of fresh water into larger bodies of salt water. The lack allowed salt to flow into smaller rivers and creeks.

Griffin said the county lost at least one large Bertie County farmer this season and several others are not sure they will be able to get financing to grow this season's fields.

"We need a good year, adequate rainfall and temperatures," Griffin said. "Then I see no effect last year will have on our crops. But they are already predicting a dry year and possible severe storms again."

"But the thing that's killing farming is commodities prices. We cannot keep going with the commodity price farmers are getting now."

This year will be the breaking point for Bertie County

—Billy Griffin

sources \$3,400,000 from loan deficiency payments; \$627,000 for peanuts; \$630,000 from the crop loss disaster program; \$70,000 for soybeans; \$125,000 from cotton seen oil; and \$1,700,000 from AMTA.

Griffin says this money is the only thing which allows many farmers to go back into the fields this growing season.

Bertie County has about 95,000 acres of row-crop land.

acres, the county's estimated gross income from agriculture has dropped in recent years.

Total gross income in 1996 was \$55,806,724 and was \$53,491,068 in 1997. By 1998, total had dropped to \$48,565,213 and drops even lower to \$29,261,795 for 1999 after last year's floods.

The top three money-producing crops are tobacco, cotton and peanuts.

Tobacco grossed \$11,705,199

First there was too little rain during the growing season, particularly for corn, then there was too much rain at harvest time making 1999 one of the lowest years for agriculture in recent history. Bertie County farmers really need a good year in 2000 to continue to operate—and the predictions are for another dry year and more severe storms. (Photo by Carroll Credle)



D. JOYNER & ASSOCIATES
 REAL ESTATE • APPRAISALS • CONSULTANT
 DAVID C. JOYNER
 STATE-CERTIFIED GENERAL REAL ESTATE APPRAISER
 P. O. BOX 551
 129 E. GRANVILLE ST.
 WINDSOR, NORTH CAROLINA 27983
 BUS: (252) 794-5025
 FAX: (252) 794-5015

Ron Cooke, Appraiser
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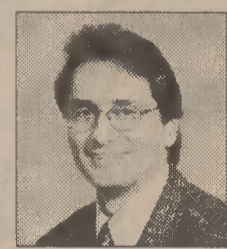
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