



Oregon Water Resources Congress



Oregon Agriculture Natural Disaster Briefing Paper

September 13, 2021

The Oregon agricultural community has endured multiple “once in a generation” challenges that individually are tough but cumulatively are threatening. **We are asking the state for targeted assistance to help Oregon’s agricultural community weather this unprecedented time and to help our farm and ranch families build the resiliency to adapt to the more frequent disasters that are expected in the coming years.**

As the agricultural community was working hard to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by protecting their workforce, navigating market disruptions, and adjusting to a post-COVID economy, producers were hit by a series of natural disasters. Farmers and ranchers are prepared to withstand and navigate weather and market impacts, but each disaster added a unique hardship.

Since late June, we have been working closely with the Governor’s office and our natural resource agencies to share the stories of the myriad Oregon sectors impacted by natural disasters, to identify the gaps that exist in federal funding, and to work together to advocate for both federal and state assistance. We appreciate the efforts of the Governor’s office to build a natural disaster package and emphasize the need for urgency in getting those resources to producers on the ground.

Our organizations represent the diversity of Oregon agriculture – collectively, we represent over 15,000 Oregon farmers and ranchers across all of Oregon’s 225+ commodity types. Our producers are both first generation and multi-generational, diversified, organic, conventional, irrigated, dryland, and all farming methods in between. We are proud to be the collective voice for Oregon’s agricultural sector and are working together to develop a collective list of federal gaps, prioritize urgent funding needs among our sectors, and help the state develop a meaningful disaster relief package that will direct assistance where it is most needed.

Background on Natural Disasters

2020 and 2021 have been record setting disaster years for Oregon, with one disaster rolling into the next:

- **Wildfire:** The 2020 and current wildfire seasons are impacting producers statewide. The catastrophic September wildfires burning across our state decimated rangeland and several farms, leveling much of Southern Oregon’s agricultural workforce housing, displacing livestock, and burning crops. The associated smoke stunted fall crops and impacted winegrapes, resulting in millions of dollars in losses to farm and

ranch families. The smoke also created stress for livestock and affected dairy production. The current fires are threatening livestock producers and decimating critical rangeland that provides forage for livestock and habitat for wildlife.

- **Ice Storm:** In February 2021, the ice storms across the Willamette Valley and the Columbia Gorge caused significant damage to fruit and nut trees and nursery stock, which producers knew would result in a smaller 2021 crop and depressed farm revenues due to decreased production. Damage from the ice storm will impact orchard and nursery production for many years to come. The ice storm also caused widespread power outages, impacted dairy farms, cold storage, and other perishable commodities.
- **Heat Dome:** In June 2021, the record-setting heat dome caused significant impacts across the community, many that are still being realized as harvest continues. Among the hardest hit in Oregon were berry and cherry crops, with reports of up to 80% loss; Christmas tree growers experiencing up to 90% loss; and seed growers reporting early losses of 50% due to the heat and drought. Without some assistance, many of these farmers will not make it through the end of the year. The heat dome also caused losses of nursery crops and dairy production. In the nursery industry, shade plants had a toll and fields of maple varieties were scorched. The combination of the heat and wind put potted plants in container operations in jeopardy, and many operations did not have the personnel to do proper advanced and periodic watering mitigations. Due to the heat, many farm workers worked shortened days for their safety and welfare, making labor scarce.
- **Drought:** Beginning in the spring of 2021 and continuing through this fall, the West is in the grip of the worst drought on record, with over 90% of Oregon reporting to be in severe or higher drought. The statewide drought in Oregon, combined with associated Endangered Species Act (ESA) restrictions in some basins, has meant no water deliveries in much of the Klamath Basin, reduced water deliveries in the Deschutes and Rogue basins, and water shortages for farmers statewide. In these basins, we expect to see a large increase in farm bankruptcies, as many have experienced wholesale crop failure without adequate irrigation water. In non-irrigated areas, the drought will have a multi-year impact. Across the normally wet Willamette Valley, yields are down in nearly every commodity, and a nationwide grass seed shortage is expected. Already, nearly three quarters of wheat producers face poor to very poor crop conditions, dramatically reducing yields. The drought has also caused wholesale loss of rangeland and a West-wide hay shortage that has led many cattle producers to engage in the liquidation of large portions of their herds. These impacts are compounded by massive grasshopper and cricket infestations impacting large swaths of Eastern Oregon that producers have inadequate tools to address. The drought has also created stress on farm crops, as wildlife move down from their

normal summer range and cause substantial damage to already drought stressed crops.

At this point, there is not a producer in Oregon who has not be negatively impacted by natural disasters in the past year. These disasters are also impacting our workforce, causing workers to miss days, and farmers to have delays in production or harvest of their crop.

Gaps in Federal Programs

Unfortunately, we are learning too late that many of our federal safety net programs for farmers and ranchers are simply not suited to the diversity of commodities we raise in Oregon and the types of losses our producers have experienced over the past year. Oregon is a specialty crop state, which means that we grow over 225 different crops, making our producers largely more diversified than much of the nation's agriculture. However, it also means that many of the federal programs, which are designed primarily around Midwestern and Southern states' needs, leave many Oregon producers ineligible for federal disaster relief.

In many cases, the federal programs that exist do not cover the losses experienced by producers. For example, resulting from the February 2021 ice storm and June 2021 heat dome, many tree and vine producers sought assistance from the USDA Tree Assistance Program (TAP). However, to receive TAP payments, a stand of eligible trees, bushes, or vines must have suffered more than a 15% mortality loss (over normal mortality) due to a declared natural disaster. In both the ice storm and heat dome, the majority of trees, bushes, or vines didn't suffer mortality, but their fruit or nuts didn't survive. In the case of nursery stock, they too didn't suffer complete mortality, but sunburn, cracked branches, and other impacts left plants with no value.

Similarly, the Livestock Forage Program provides payments to producers who have suffered a loss of grazed forage due to a qualifying drought. However, many producers have had to graze their fall or winter pastures early or graze their hay land, both of which may not be eligible under the program. In other instances, relief provided under the program falls far short of the need with low payments and skyrocketing hay prices. This means that producers are heading into the fall and winter without the necessary forage to get them through the season, with their hay ground unproductive and with hay prices skyrocketing due to the drought.

There may be programs that cover losses in other cases, but they require funding (and, in some cases, adjustments to coverage). For farmers who suffer direct wildfire and drought losses, the Wildfire Hurricane Indemnity Program (WHIP+) assists eligible producers for crops, trees, bushes, and vines. The Quality Loss Adjustment Enhancement provides further support for producers suffering losses in crop quality. However, these programs need to be authorized and have funds appropriated each disaster year, which has proven difficult even in years with the unprecedented weather events we have experienced, leaving growers with no relief in sight.

We are working with the federal delegation to address these gaps and are urging flexibility in existing programs where possible. However, funding for certain programs is likely to be delayed by years, and other programs will require changes through the future Farm Bill, a process that is also more than a year out. Given the number of producers that need immediate assistance, there are few options for adjusting the federal programs to meet their needs in the short term.

Need for State Assistance

The State of Oregon can do several things to help its agricultural producers remain solvent through this unprecedented year:

- **Federal Assistance:** We request that Governor Brown engage with the federal delegation and the Governors of the Western States to secure immediate disaster relief that covers all of our unprecedented natural disaster events and all of our impacted producers.
- **State Assistance:** However, any Congressional assistance is likely later in the year; assistance from the state is needed to help producers bridge the gap between their immediate needs and when federal funding can reasonably be made available.

To that end, we request that the Legislature allocate a portion of the funds set aside in Section 167 of HB 5006 for natural disaster relief to help the agricultural community bridge the gap between when federal funding may be made available and to address the most urgent and immediate needs of producers. We stand ready to help identify these urgent needs, and work with the Governor on a proposed disaster relief package is ongoing.

Thank you for your assistance, and please contact us with any questions.