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Peach growers get help for lost crop

Upstate farmers, others, eligible for federal aid because of disastrous freeze in April

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture declared Thursday that Greenville and Spartanburg peach farmers are eligible for disaster farm relief, providing critical help for the farmers who generally lost their entire 2007 crop in an April freeze.

But they're not the only ones. The declaration designated 41 counties as primary natural disaster areas. Insufficient information was available for confirmation of production losses in Beaufort, Jasper, Kershaw, Sumter and Union counties.

The designation allows eligible growers to obtain low-interest loans and disaster payments, which don't have to be repaid, said Ken Rentiers, executive director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency in Columbia.

Losses from the freeze have rippled throughout the state, affecting local and migrant workers, suppliers of farm chemicals and equipment and roadside produce stands. Growers are the only ones that could be helped directly by the disaster declaration.

Advertisement Equipment and chemical suppliers, however, "may get help indirectly" when farmers receive money from low-interest loans, crop insurance or other disaster aid programs, said U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C.

A widespread disaster because of a freeze is "fairly unusual," Rentiers said. Statewide drought declarations are not unusual, but most other disasters tend to occur in paths rather than an entire state.

More than 90 percent of the state's peach crops was lost to the early April freeze.


"If you're going to need to borrow money to put in a crop, it will be helpful," said Lem Dillard, a Greer peach grower who lost his entire crop but still runs an ice cream parlor he opened several years ago after an earlier crop loss. "If you don't have the money to pay it back, you're just getting in deeper."

Dillard said he hasn't decided whether he will grow peaches next year. For the past two years or so, he's had difficulty finding orchard workers, he said, and he plans to wait until he sees what happens with the immigration legislation.

"I want to know a lot about a lot of things" before making a final decision," he said.

Inglis said, "The disaster designation won't bring back the peaches that were frozen in April, but it may help some growers stay in business for next year's crop" and that's vital because of the nation's need for food and fiber.

Rentiers said farmers should go to the Farm Service Agency's county offices to apply for the loan and disaster

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payments.

"We expedite the loans as much as possible," he said.

In addition to peaches, tomatoes on the coast were hard hit. About 50 percent of the strawberry crop was lost although the remaining fruit was good. The freeze also wiped out watermelons and cantaloupes in the field. Peppers, eggplants, squash and cucumbers sustained damage. Planted tobacco -- about 50 percent to 60 percent of the crop -- was destroyed. Corn also was hit hard.

Inglis met with Upstate peach farmers on May 4 to discuss farm issues as well as immigration issues. Also, representatives of the Department of Agriculture met with Upstate farmers on June 4.
