Farmers urged to report wildfire losses

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Help is available.

That's the message for farmers and ranchers who have sustained losses because of wildfires, a representative of the USDA Farm Service Agency says.

Losses reported include livestock, forage and fences, said Chris Bieker, state outreach coordinator for the FSA office in Spokane, Wash.

It's too soon to estimate the total value of losses, Bieker said.

Bieker recommends growers who have sustained damage collect documentation, including photos, and contact their local FSA office.

"It really helps to speed up the process if people have their farm records set up with us already," Bieker said. "If they don't, it can take a little bit longer, but we are here to help them with that process."

Livestock producers may be eligible to receive compensation under the Livestock Indemnity Program. Payment rates are on a per-head basis. FSA makes payments of 75 percent of the fair market value of the livestock. Swine and poultry contract growers may receive 75 percent of the average income loss they sustain. Livestock must be part of a commercial farming operation.

The agency provides financial compensation for forage and pasture losses under the Livestock Forage Disaster Program on federally managed land or the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm-Raised Fish Program on private land.

The agency makes livestock forage program payments based on a portion of feed costs used to make up for lost grazing access. ELAP payments are subject to a national payment factor, because there is a set amount of funding nationwide for ELAP applications.

The Emergency Conservation Program and Conservation Reserve Program Emergency Haying and Grazing program could also become available, according to the agency, depending on federal approval.

CRP Emergency Haying and Grazing is already available in all Eastern Washington counties due to drought. The FSA will not reduce annual CRP payments for emergency haying and grazing under the 2014 Farm Bill, stated Judy Olson, state executive director for the agency in Spokane.

Farmers should report their losses to their local office within 30 days of discovering the loss, Olson stated in a press release.

Latest hazard for firefighters: Poison oak

SANTA MARGARITA, Calif. (AP) — Nearly 200 firefighters have been treated for allergic reactions to poison oak while battling a stubborn blaze that has charred more than 5 square miles of dry brush on California's Central Coast, a fire official said Tuesday.

The dreaded plant is intertwined with chaparral and is so ubiquitous in the steep wilderness of San Luis Obispo County that crews can't avoid it, said Bennett Milloy, spokesman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"The vegetation is so thick it's almost a jungle-like environment, and the poison oak is all wrapped up in it," he said. "In some places, it's 12 feet high."

Milloy, who suffered an outbreak himself, said at least 190 firefighters have been treated — but many more likely haven't reported their itchy, oozing symptoms. Several patients had reactions so severe that they required steroid injections, he said.

More than 1,300 personnel are on the scene of the blaze near the town of Santa Margarita. The fire, sparked Aug. 16, is 85 percent contained.

AP Photo/Keith Ridler

Warren Heslip, 47, of Southland, New Zealand, receives a yellow firefighting shirt on Aug. 24 at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

None of the 16 wildfires burning around California is posing serious danger of destruction or fast spread — but that could change this week.

A heating trend with decreased humidity were expected to peak Thursday and Friday. With it could come thunderstorms and lightning to inland areas where some of the main fires were burning, the National Weather Service said.

Schools were closed for a second day in the Southern California mountain community where crews battled a small but smoky wildfire burning through timber near a popular ski resort. Firefighters held the blaze in Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains to 100 acres. It was 30 percent contained.

Residents told to be ready to flee wildfire

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Residents along U.S. Highway 95 in west-central Idaho including those living in the town of Riggins were told to be ready to evacuate Wednesday because of a wildfire that was on the move.

Fire managers say the size of the fire grew to 29 square miles — a 5-square-mile increase from Tuesday — with extreme fire behavior that included sustained runs through tree crowns and long-range spotting.

Officials say winds up to 20 mph and hot conditions made firefighting difficult Wednesday.

A group of fires in northern Idaho near Kamiah remained at 74 square miles as crews worked to strengthen lines against the blazes that have destroyed 42 homes.

Sixteen large fires were burning in Idaho, the National Interagency Fire Center says.

Lacey Jarrell/For the Capital Press

Scott Scholer, field manager of Lassen Canyon Nursery in Macdoel, Calif., points out runners that will be cut off mother plants and sold to strawberry growers across the United States.

Nursery specializes in growing strawberry plants

By LACEY JARRELL
For the Capital Press

MACDOEL, Calif. — Scott Scholer has been in the strawberry business for 23 years.

He has stayed in it so long, he says, because no two days are the same.

"Agriculture is an adventure," Scholer laughed.

This year, Scholer, the general manager of field production at Lassen Canyon Nursery in Macdoel, Calif., oversees 838 acres of strawberries. He said each year strawberry acreage on the 5,000-acre Klamath Basin farm varies based on the number of orders made by large-scale commercial fruit growers, mainly in California.

"They plant them to make berries. Our high elevation nursery is the last step to the fruit grower," Scholer said.

Strawberry plants are not grown for fruit at Lassen — they are grown for runners that are separated from mother plants, developed by specialty breeders, such as at the University of California or the University of Florida. Growing the mother plants into suitable, salable offspring is a process that takes several years and spans several locations.

"By the time these plants get here to Macdoel, they are fourth generation," Scholer said.

Once in the ground at Lassen, the plants multiply "like crazy." He said rows spaced 3 feet apart are planted in March or April, and by harvest time in September, the plants are so dense they look like a "green carpet."

"We plant 12,000 plants per acre. We'll harvest 300,000," Scholer said. "Last year we did over 200 million plants out of Macdoel."

According to Scholer, Lassen is based in Northern California's Butte Valley because the weather cools considerably in early fall. He explained that hardy nursery plants perform best in the fruiting field if they have a lot of chill prior to harvest.

"We hope for somewhere about 250 hours of cold, which is below 45 degrees from Sept. 1 to harvest time," he said.

This year's mild winter has helped his crop get a head start, but each season brings its own surprises, Scholer said.

"Mother Nature can turn around and tease you. One of our big concerns is hail. If we were to get a big hail storm, at any time during the season, it can be very detrimental because it cuts off the runners."

In 2007, a major hail storm hit in early July. He said the hail took the nursery's crop "clear down to dirt."

"There's no cut-and-dry way of doing this. You have weather — you've got heat, cold. Year-to-year differences are huge," he said. "Most people will tell you, just wait 10 minutes and the weather in the Klamath Basin will change."

At peak harvest in a good year, workers process between 6 million and 8 million plants per day.

Scholer said there are nine strawberry producers in Butte Valley, but when he started nearly two decades ago, there were only two.

"Most of the industry is friendly competition, and the goal is to grow the best plant possible. There's plenty of room for all of us — no one nursery could ever supply enough plants for the entire industry."

'Plasticulture' system strawberries generate higher costs and higher profits

Expensive, complex system offers multiple benefits, experts say

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

CORNELIUS, Ore. — Growing fresh market strawberries in a "plasticulture" system isn't cheap or easy.

But farmers who are willing to invest the additional money and effort can be rewarded with bountiful yields, quality fruit — and higher profits, experts say.

That's particularly true at a time when grocery stores in Oregon are seeking local sources of fresh strawberries, said Lora Liegel, projects coordinator at Peerbolt Crop Management, which helps growers manage berry crops.

"They want more fresh market strawberries. The demand is there if they can get the volume and the quality," she said.

In a plasticulture system, strawberries are grown in raised beds that are covered in plastic sheets and irrigated with drip lines that also dispense fertilizer.

The advantages of this technique are multiple. The plastic prevents weeds from emerging and heat from escaping the soil while keeping dirt off the fruit.

"We know it keeps the berries clean, and that's huge for fresh market," said Will Unger, whose family grows berries near Cornelius, Ore.

The drip lines bring water and nutrients right to the plant's root zone, and the incidence of fungal disease is reduced compared to overhead irrigation.

Irrigation efficiency is also improved due to decreased evaporation, said Matt Unger, Will Unger's father. "You probably save 20 to 30 percent."

The Ungers recently demonstrated the process of installing the system at a workshop held at their farm near Cornelius.

After irrigating a field to attain the proper soil moisture and then tilling it, they used a specially designed tractor-driven implement that mechanically forms the beds while covering them with sheeting and laying irrigation tubes beneath the plastic.

The implement also pokes holes in the sheeting into which strawberry plants are inserted with hand tools.

The Ungers plant "day-neutral" varieties that flower regardless of day length, so their plasticulture strawberries are produced continuously for the fresh market from spring until autumn, instead of a single summer crop.

The costs of equipment, materials and labor involved in plasticulture add up quick.

According to a study by Oregon State University, the total per-acre cost of growing strawberries in a plasticulture system is roughly 40 to 100 percent greater than for a conventional "matted row" field.

The payoffs are also bigger due to higher overall yields and prices: a fully-productive plasticulture field generated up to $14,000 in profits per acre, compared to roughly $4,000 for a matted row field also devoted to the fresh market, according to the OSU study.

However, the study notes that the higher establishment costs render plasticulture more risky in the case of crop loss or market downturns.

Aside from expense, plasticulture can present farmers with some other challenges.

For any fresh market strawberry, it's critical that growers have effective cold storage to preserve freshness and prolong shelf life.

Removing a field of plasticulture strawberries, which usually occurs every two years, is more complicated and expensive because plastic remnants must be picked up by hand.

While the plants are still growing, plastic sheeting can conceal leaks and clogs in irrigation lines that only become visible to the farmer once they encounter pools of water or dying plants.

Water with large amounts of silt can block the irrigation tubes, said Will Unger. "It depends on the water source."

Photos by Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Matt Unger demonstrates how strawberries are planted in plastic-covered beds during a recent workshop on this "plasticulture" technique that was held at Unger Farms near Cornelius, Ore. The method is more expensive but can yield greater profits.

Strawberries grow in plastic sheeting at Unger Farms near Cornelius, Ore. The farm was the site of a recent workshop on "plasticulture," a system in which strawberries are raised in plastic-covered beds and irrigated with drip lines.

Monsanto abandons takeover bid for Swiss rival Syngenta

WASHINGTON (AP) — Agricultural business giant Monsanto is abandoning its takeover bid for competitor Syngenta AG after the Swiss chemical producer rejected its latest offer of roughly $47 billion.

A combination with Basel-based Syngenta would have made Monsanto the world's largest producer of farming chemicals, on top of its market-leading seed business. But the Swiss company rejected a series of unsolicited offers from the American company.

Monsanto confirmed Wednesday that it had raised its offer last week to 470 francs per share, or roughly $47 billion, from a previous offer of about $45 billion. Additionally, the company confirmed it had raised its proposed break-up fee to $3 billion from $2 billion.

But Monsanto says the enhanced offer "did not meet Syngenta's financial expectations."

Monsanto Co. shares rose more than 6 percent in morning trading.

AP Photo/Keystone, Georgios Kefalas, file

In this file photo is the headquarters and logo of the Swiss chemical maker Syngenta in Basel, Switzerland. St. Louis, Mo.-based Monsanto Co.has abandoned an attempt to buy the company.