

Perdue: Congress could provide disaster aid for flooded farmbelt

By RYAN MCCRIMMON | 03/19/2019 02:40 PM EDT

Nebraska could face nearly a billion dollars in agricultural damage from catastrophic flooding across parts of the farmbelt, the state's top agriculture official said Tuesday.

"It's hundreds of millions of dollars, approaching a billion dollars of impact straight to agriculture," Nebraska Agriculture Director Steve Wellman told reporters on a conference call. "That does not include structural damage or any of the infrastructure."

Wellman said "reliable numbers" weren't available yet for specific agricultural losses. Floodwaters haven't receded in parts of the state, and the damage was still being surveyed.

The New York Times reported that Wellman had estimated the livestock sector impact could be \$400 million.

"We tried to take a percentage of what we think the losses might be," he said when asked about that figure. "That \$400 million of loss to the livestock sector includes additional feed costs for loss of feed on the ground that will have to be replaced. It includes a percentage of death loss that we tried to calculate, and also increased cost for care of the animals."

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said Nebraska farmers and ranchers could require additional federal aid to help recover from the flooding, as existing safety net programs "may not be enough for these farmers who have lost everything."

"We hopefully will have a supplemental disaster bill out of Congress very soon," Perdue said on Fox Business Network. "This may be included in that as well."

The Senate is expected to vote next week on a \$13.6 billion disaster relief spending bill, S. 572 (116), to help states recover from devastating storms and wildfires in 2018. The House has already passed its \$14.2 billion version, H.R. 268 (116).

Last week's "bomb cyclone" winter storm and the ensuing flooding struck Midwestern producers who are already facing headwinds like tariffs and low commodity prices.

"We're certainly in an economic situation that it's tough to be profitable in," Wellman said, citing the decrease in net farm income over the past five years. "This type of disaster obviously, some individuals are going to be impacted more than others. Some farms have been completely destroyed ... We'll rebound as best we can."

Wellman said Nebraska processes more red meat than any other state, so there could be a “ripple effect that reaches the rest of the country.”

Craig Head, vice president of issue management at the Nebraska Farm Bureau, told POLITICO that damage from the severe weather could top \$400 million in livestock losses and \$440 million in crop losses, because of crops that will be planted late or not at all.

Neither of those “very early estimates” account for property damage to roads, bridges, barns, fences, irrigation systems and other infrastructure, Head said.

Perdue said a million calves might have been killed in Nebraska. In an interview on Cheddar, he said there also has been “a lot of damage to stored soybeans in Iowa right now,” noting the high concentration of grain storage along waterways that are now overflowing.

Jesse Chase-Lubitz contributed to this report.

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