

United State Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee
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Despite our reputation as a vibrant urban and tourist center, San Diego County is home to the twelfth largest farm economy among all counties in the nation. We rely on high-valued crops to overcome the cost of land and imported water, illustrated by the fact we are the country's leading producer of nursery crops and avocados. Our climate and terrain lend themselves well to the crops we grow, but those same attributes make our region vulnerable to fire.

Because farms here are small - 60% of our more than 5,000 farms are 10 acres or smaller - they are not contiguous and are dispersed throughout the region. This dispersal often places them in the more fire-prone areas adjacent to native brush. This resulted in nearly 3000 acres damaged or destroyed and more than \$42 million in crop losses in the recent wildfires. The actual cost to farmers will go much higher when losses to irrigation systems, equipment, and several years of lost income while new trees and plants mature are calculated. The cost of financing will also add a burden.

When the fires blew into areas with farms, little defense for the farms was available as firefighting capacity was appropriately directed to structures and public safety. Additionally, farms on the side of steep slopes or in canyons were very vulnerable. As with urban evacuations, farmers took what they could and left with many returning to discover the loss of their livelihood. Several lost their homes as well.

Once the fires had passed, several issues arose for farmers. The first was difficulty gaining access back onto farms to feed livestock, milk cows, or irrigate crops because of concerns about security for unprotected evacuated properties. That matter is under review by local authorities and we hope for a reasonable solution. The next problem was the municipal water systems that took days to return to full service while crops went unwatered, resulting in losses.

As time has passed, farmers have reviewed their options and the paramount concern is the financial resources needed to repair irrigation systems, clear debris and unsalvageable crops, replace equipment, and buy trees and plants for replanting. As we look to the future the greatest financial challenge for farmers who choose to replant will be the multiple years without income while trees and plants mature to productive size.

The United States Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service have responded quickly and been attentive to farmers' needs. However, the resources available through those agencies have been limited. At this time \$6.6 million has been allocated to two programs for debris removal, irrigation repair, fence replacement, and emergency erosion controls. It is my understanding that none of these funds were directly available for fire assistance, but were diverted from

other programs in California. Because the funds are from other programs, farmers are facing deadlines as early as this Friday to complete the application process. While this assistance is greatly appreciated, it does require farmers to self-finance the repairs and then be reimbursed. This may put the relief out of reach for farmers who have taken heavy losses and now have no income.

Other programs that could help farmers remain unfunded. The best example would be the Tree Assistance Program to help replace trees and vines that were lost. While we hope this program receives funding, it is important to note that it is restrictive and would not be available to farmers who produce cut flowers from perennial shrubs. Hopefully that can be rectified through legislation.

The Farm Service Agency was quick to announce the availability of emergency low-interest loans. However, eligibility requires that an applicant be refused credit by traditional lenders. In most cases that will mean farmers will be faced with accepting new debt at market rates and not have access to the low-interest loans.

Another area of concern is crop insurance. Many crops produced in San Diego County do not have access to crop insurance. Even those covered by crop insurance will not be helped with the massive cost of replacing infrastructure and crops. In general, crop insurance is confusing because of annually changing formulas and with exclusions for such risks as quarantines and fires that are not deemed natural disasters, it has severe limitations.

In closing, I would like to restate that federal officials have been readily available and sincerely trying to help. The problems have been due to funding and program limitations. It is important that farmers who suffered fire damage have every opportunity to reestablish their productivity for the good of our community. One seldom discussed aspect of that is the fact that irrigated crops often acted as effective fire breaks.

Thank you for your concern and please feel free to call upon the Farm Bureau at any time in addressing these issues.