

HAIL STORM WIPES OUT WHOLE CROPS ON THE NORTH COAST

ABC Rural. By Emma Sykes from Bangalow , NSW

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The hail storm that swept through the northern rivers on Wednesday afternoon has caused significant damage to farms in the region.

Stone fruit, blueberry and macadamias farmers, so far have reported the most damage along the coast, some farmers reporting whole crops have been destroyed.

Stone fruit farmer Ray Hicks reporting running at a loss for a second year in a row.

"We've found ourselves in the same situation as last year, with the October hail storm that hit"

"The whole crop is gone, which I think is about \$100 000 worth."

Mr Hicks says the storm was a like nothing he'd seen before, having farmed on the north coast for the last 11 years.

"It was an incredible storm, you could hear it coming, and the winds were gale force."

Ray Hicks believes now that all they can do is clean up the crop and think about next year.

"We're coming off a bad year last year with unseasonal cold frosts at the start of the year.

"There's only a certain amount of times you can fund a farming operation when you keep making losses each year."

Mr Hicks was pleased that there was no infrastructural damage to his farm, but others in the area weren't so lucky.

John Gough, a stone fruit farmer from Wollongbar also copped the brunt of the storm but managed to salvage most of his crop.

The hail nets on his farm unable to keep the hail from falling through in some areas, tearing it in many places.

"I don't think I've lost a great deal of fruit, we'd knocked quite a bit of fruit of a few days earlier"

"For us the damage has been with the hail nets. Some panels are still in perfect condition, but others have torn right away," he says.

The hail stones, described in many places as 'the size of golf balls', were still a fair size a day after the fact.

"This hail has been sitting in the nets for the last 20 hours and it hasn't melted much."

Mr Gough says he has to look on the bright side in these situations.

"We've had this netting for 15 years; we've got to be happy with that."

Minister for Primary Industries Ian Macdonald said that a horticulturist would be sent out to assess the damage caused by the storm.

Phillip Wilk from the Alstonville Centre for Tropical Horticulture visited North Coast farms to compile a report on damage from the hailstorm.

He says he can't comment on whether there will be any aid package, but he's seen widespread crop devastation.

Ballina MP Don Page says regional producers may be able to get compensation for the hail storm.

Mr Page and the Lismore MP Thomas George, were yesterday attempting to contact the state minister for emergency services, Tony Kelly, regarding Natural Disaster assistance.

Mr Page is urging local producers affected by the storms to get in touch with him so the state government can assess the damage costs.

"The process is that the DPI need to make a report to the minister for emergency services in relation to an assessment of the damage and I know from contacts with constituents that the damage is very significant in a lot of our orchards, blueberries macadamias stone fruit."

Farmers affected by the hail storms are being encouraged to report damage to Alstonville Tropical Horticulture on 66262400, or in the Coffs Harbour DPI if affected by the earlier storm on 66503111.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rural/content/2008/s2399554.htm>



The damage caused to the hail nets on one stone fruit farm on the North Coast | Photographer: | Emma Sykes



Left over hail that split netting on a stone fruit farm at Wollongbar | Photographer: | Emma Sykes



The left over hail still caught in hail nets on one north coast farm | Photographer: | Emma Sykes