

Hailstorm wipes out \$1.5m blueberry crop

■ Jamie Brown

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WHEN Otto and Lynette Saeck named their farm at Brooklet 'Blueberry Fields' they never thought it would be all wine and roses.

However, they had banked on more than a few profitable years.

But nature has dealt the family business a cruel blow, with three major hail events in the past five years.

Mr Saeck estimates that \$1.5 million worth of blueberries were destroyed on their farm in just 10 minutes in last Wednesday's hailstorm.

Otto Saeck inspects hail storm damage to his farm, Blueberry Fields, in Brooklet. The Northern Star.



A further 20 per cent of their crop was spared, growing under hail netting erected after another disastrous storm in 2003. But damage to the netting was extensive.

With more than 50 casual fruit pickers now laid off, Mr Saeck said the impact of the storm on the local farming community was extensive, and he was seeking financial help.

"At this point we need carry-on funding and money to meet our bank obligations, not just another loan," he said.

"We are asking for the same relief that was offered to drought-affected farmers.

"These are very dire times. Our livelihood, our superannuation, it has all been wiped out."

Most of Australia's blueberry production is centred on the North Coast, with the early summer harvest aimed at a lucrative six-week gap in world supply. Soil, water and climate - most of the time - has helped produce perfect high bush blueberries.

But recent damaging hail events have growers worried. Fortunately, supply from the region's biggest farm at Halfway Creek, south of Grafton, was untouched so supermarket shelves will still stock blueberries.

Calls for help answered

LOCAL primary producers hit by last week's hailstorm are now eligible for [Natural Disaster Relief](#) assistance, NSW Minister for Primary Industries Ian Macdonald has said.

The hailstorm caused at least \$3 million damage on many properties between Tregear and Suffolk Park.

Ten properties visited by a [Department of Primary Industries](#) horticulturist the day after the storm were found to have had 50-60 per cent of their fruit damaged by hail.

"The cost of lost fruit on these properties was estimated at more than \$1 million, in addition to the large amounts of damage to netting and other infrastructure," Mr Macdonald said.

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