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Salinas Valley crop damage tops \$500 million

By

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Preliminarily, Monterey County officials and agricultural experts have indicated that crop losses from the torrential rains that have hit the Salinas Valley this year could easily top \$500 million.

Those numbers are just guesstimates with no expectation that a final figure will be available for several months. What seems to be certain, however, is that crop losses are significant and the vegetable market will soon be feeling the effects with much higher prices.

Dan Walker, a commodity manager with Salinas, CA-based Church Bros. Farms, said on Tuesday, March 21, “the vegetable market is still stagnant, but we see that changing within the next two to three weeks. The desert is starting to run out of product and when that happens the market will react.”

He said Church Bros. is scheduled to transition to the Salinas Valley in mid-April, with most other shippers following suit sometime during the first few weeks of April. Walker said he couldn’t hazard a guess as to how many acres have been impacted because the water hasn’t receded yet in so many places. He added that many fields will have to be replanted for food-safety reasons. “We will be dealing with this for the next three to four months,” he said. “I would guess that tens of thousands of acres have been affected.”

Norm Groot, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau, said that growers of flooded fields must follow necessary food-safety protocols, which will cause a delay in replanting. Any crop on a field that is flooded has to be discarded. “Once the water recedes, growers can begin the testing protocols that they have to pass before they can replant,” he said. “When flooding occurred in January, we witnessed that it typically took 30 to 60 days to get through those protocols.”

Groot said the number of acres underwater will certainly be much more than the 15,000 acres that were flooded in January. Salinas Valley has 220,000 acres of irrigated crops.

Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner Juan Hidalgo didn’t dispute that the affected acreage could run into the tens of thousands. He told *The Produce News* that the damage is very significant, but no firm estimate had been made. “It is going to take us about a month to come up with a good number,” he said, adding that his office is in the process of surveying growers throughout the county.

“I can tell you that this is the second flooding event we’ve seen this year,” he said. “The first one was in January where the damage assessment was \$330 million in direct impact and future losses. There was also about \$10 million in infrastructure damages.”

Hidalgo said close to 16,000 acres were impacted by flooding. “Given what we have seen from the latest storms (in early March), it appears that the damage will play out in a similar fashion with even

more extensive flooding.”

He added that there are still several areas in Monterey County where the water has not receded. “We are just looking at lakes,” he said. “We don’t know if they were planted in crops or not.”

Hidalgo said that is why the entire grower community needs to be surveyed, which is a time-consuming effort. “That could take several months,” he added.

The ag commissioner said the hardest hit areas were farms in close proximity to the Salinas River as well as the entirety of North Monterey County’s Pajaro Valley and the town of Pajaro, which was flooded. “The Salinas River runs 60 to 70 miles down the valley,” he said. “Any farm along that river was in jeopardy. And a levee broke on the Pajaro River, which flooded lots of acres and that small community, unfortunately.”

He said the levee has been fixed, which has at least put an end to the flow of water.

On March 17, government officials joined together with ag community members to discuss the flood issues. According to a newsletter from the Salinas-based Grower-Shipper Association, topics of conversation included flood impacts and regulatory concerns that will affect berm repairs and Salinas River channel improvements.

The newsletter noted that preliminary estimates indicate that about 12.5 percent of the overall farm gate crop value of \$4 billion for Monterey County could be lost. “As for the potential economic effect on the region, covering wages, and a hit to the services sector, a 12.5 percent mark equates to a \$1.5 billion impact (out of a \$12 billion economic contribution by the agricultural sector). Combined, the effects could reach \$2 billion (\$500 million crop loss plus \$1.5 billion economic impact),” the newsletter reported.

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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