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Heavy crop losses reported in Southeast

By Katrina A. Goggins

Associated Press Writer

COLUMBIA, S.C. --

Heavy crop losses have been reported throughout the Southeast after last weekend's frigid temperatures, and farmers are bracing for another expected cold snap next week.

In South Carolina, at least 90 percent of the peach crop was destroyed and officials said Wednesday they would seek federal aid.

"This is comparable to a hurricane," Agriculture Commissioner Hugh Weathers said of the damage to the state's \$40 million-a-year industry. "Growers say we'll be fortunate to get 10 percent of a crop."

In Georgia, farmers and agriculture officials were still assessing the damage, but the weekend freeze may have wiped out more than half the state's peach crop.

"There's no doubt we had damage," said Joe McManus, a commodities specialist with the Georgia Farm Bureau. "It's just a matter of to what extent. Peaches, I'm hearing 50 (percent) plus."

The freeze also killed off a large portion of Georgia's \$60 million-a-year blueberry crop.

"Most anything that was green got damaged," said Danny Stanalan, extension coordinator for southeast Georgia's Bacon County. "Our blueberries took a hard hit."

Kathy Taylor, stone fruit horticulturist with the University of Georgia Extension Service, said Georgia's peach crop was wiped out in the northern part of the state.

Alabama and Kentucky were still estimating losses, but Dave Rickey of the Alabama Farmers Federation said there were reports of heavy damage to fruit crops across the northern half of the state.

Kentucky Agriculture Commissioner Richie Farmer has asked Gov. Ernie Fletcher to seek federal disaster relief, saying in a statement that apples and peaches there were "completely devastated."

Kentucky officials said as much as 90 percent of the state's peach and apple crops may have been destroyed, but they cautioned the figures were preliminary.

"If it's as bad as we think, it will be several million dollars," Bill Clary, spokesman for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. "We won't know that for several days."

Kentucky sold \$2.38 million worth of apples commercially last year and \$1.26 million worth of peaches.

The freeze also severely affected the state's wine grape industry and damaged hay crops.

"Everything's connected to everything else," he said. "When we have a problem with hay, obviously the cost of feeding livestock goes up."

A preliminary report in West Virginia indicated "very heavy losses" on 1,400 acres of peaches, cherries and nectarines, as well as a major loss of apples, at 11 farms in Hampshire County, said state Agriculture Department spokesman Buddy Davidson. He said the agency was still waiting for reports from other counties.

Farmers were bracing for another round of cold weather early next week. Temperatures in the mid-30s were expected in the Southeast on Monday, said Mike Griesinger, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Peachtree City, Ga.

"There's not many proactive measures that we have available," said Larry Yonce, who grows 3,000 acres of peaches in South Carolina each season. "We're just hoping and praying that temperatures won't get below freezing."

Even if temperatures do drop, "there can't be much more damage done," said Yonce, president of the South Carolina Peach Council.

Associated Press writers Elliot Minor in Tifton, Ga., Roger Alford in Frankfort, Ky., and Vicki Smith in Morgantown, W.Va., contributed to this report.

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) - Soaring grain prices and the ethanol boom drove Minnesota farm profits to their highest levels ever last year.

Net farm income - a common measure of profitability - rose to a record \$95,282 per Minnesota farm last year, according to a survey released Wednesday. That was 10 percent better than 2005, which was also a record year.

"This year, it really is the crops," said Dale Nordquist, an extension economist with the University of Minnesota's Center for Farm Financial Management. "Even on hog and dairy farms that made a lot of money, a lot of that was crop income."

The record income wasn't spread evenly across the state's farm economy. Last summer's drought hurt production and profits in the eastern portions of the state, and dairy prices across the region sagged.

"As you look at the enterprises, dairy returns were down, beef returns were down, hog returns were down," Nordquist said. "So the price of corn and beans would be the big driver."

The university's survey, done cooperatively with the Minnesota State College and University system, is based on actual financial records from 2,465 Minnesota farms.