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AGRICULTURE

Senators push for federal money for farmers affected by storms

Florida agriculture, hit hard by three hurricanes, would benefit from a disaster relief package introduced by Republican U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez.

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WASHINGTON - Florida agriculture suffered \$2.2 billion in damages from three hurricanes this season, according to state figures, and Sen. Mel Martinez wants federal aid to cover about 25 percent of those losses.

Martinez, a Florida Republican, introduced a bill Tuesday to provide the agricultural industry in five Gulf states, including Florida, with federal assistance to help during storm recovery.

The bill would provide about \$2 billion in aid for all states affected, the Congressional Budget Office said. Martinez is seeking \$40 million in that package to help provide housing for farm workers displaced by the hurricanes.

"It will be a substantial amount of money, but I'm hopeful we'll get the help we need," Martinez said.

The bill faces an uncertain future. Rep. Clay Shaw, a Fort Lauderdale Republican and chairman of the state delegation, warned that Congress was experiencing "disaster fatigue" and was under pressure to cut spending.

Florida Sen. Bill Nelson, a Democrat, is co-sponsoring the relief package. A companion bill in the House will be offered by Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a Miami Republican.

Martinez said he expected support from the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., whose state was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, and the chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Sen. Saxby Chamblis, R-Ga.

The relief bill is designed to make nurseries and tropical fruit producers eligible for assistance from the Department of Agriculture. Nurseries in South Miami-Dade were hit hard by Katrina, and nursery operations in the state suffered more than \$1 billion in damages, Martinez said.

Hurricane Dennis damaged crops in the Panhandle and Wilma, the most recent storm, hit citrus and sugar throughout the state.

Martinez said he hopes the relief measure will be part of a special spending bill for additional hurricane assistance that will not require cuts in the federal budget.

"This is emergency funding for an emergency situation," he said.