

# NEWS

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## County officials meet with state ag secretary about freeze

REDLANDS – California Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura this morning surveyed damage caused by persistent freezing weather and met with San Bernardino County officials and local citrus growers while the state considers whether to include San Bernardino County in its recent disaster declaration.

"Our hearts go out to all of our growers and farm families who have had many sleepless nights," Secretary Kawamura said. "At this point the County Agricultural Commissioner is working closely with us and the industry to quantify the damage to help determine if you qualify for federal assistance."

Secretary Kawamura said the governor will almost certainly add San Bernardino County to a disaster proclamation issued on Tuesday, and that he had spoken to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns, "who is ready to do everything in their powers to help."

That came as good news to San Bernardino County Supervisor Dennis Hansberger, who met with Secretary Kawamura today and whose Third District includes a great deal of the County's \$44 million fruit and vegetable crops. "There's no question there's damage. The question is how severe it is," Supervisor Hansberger said, explaining that it could take weeks for growers to know how much of the fruit still on trees is damaged.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane on Wednesday declared a local emergency in an effort to encourage the governor to add San Bernardino County to the list of county's covered by the state declaration. A state declaration is necessary to obtain a federal disaster declaration, which opens the door to federal assistance to growers, workers, homeowners, and businesses who have suffered damage due to the ongoing freeze.

Also meeting with Secretary Kawamura today were San Bernardino County Agricultural Commissioner Edouard Layaye and Barbara Halsey, director of the San Bernardino County Workforce Development Department.

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Layaye handed Secretary Kawamura a report documenting more than \$11 million in damage so far to the county's crops, including more than \$6.5 million in oranges alone. He said about 75 percent of the county's crop of Valencia oranges has been destroyed, and about 60 percent of navel oranges have been lost.

Halsey said the County Department of Workforce Development and the County Workforce Investment Board will work with local growers and packing houses to address any employment disruption that may occur as a result of the recent freeze, noting that the impact to the area in terms of employment in the industry may not be seen for one to two weeks while damage assessment takes place.

In the event that employers find they need to reduce work schedules or lay-off workers, the Department of Workforce Development can assist workers with information on filing claims for Disaster Related Unemployment Insurance, and provide information on and referral to other job opportunities.

"Our goal is to allow workers to re-employ as quickly as possible to maintain the stream of income they need to support themselves and their families," Halsey said. "We have information on training programs which may be available to displaced workers and can also assist with information on temporary work that would fill the employment gap while they wait for the industry to rebound."

Some of the affected businesses may be interested in reducing hours rather than laying-off workers and the Department can provide information and assistance in partnership with the State Employment Development Department on programs that would allow for reduction of hours in lieu of lay-offs.

"One grower at the meeting this morning indicated that they needed more workers," Halsey said. "We can assist with finding employees for those businesses as well."

Businesses or workers who are interested in additional information can contact the County Department of Workforce Development at (909) 387-9860 to be connected to the office nearest them or resource most appropriate for their specific situations.

Preliminary estimates tag at \$11,855,584 the damage attributable to the ongoing spate of extremely low overnight temperatures, which began on January 11 and is expected to continue for at least several more days.

That initial sum includes \$11,051,700 in agricultural losses, \$578,320 in damage to 148 residences and 214 private businesses, and \$69,564 in damage to 19 public facilities, including the Barstow and Victorville courthouses and the County office complex in the Big Bear Valley.

Additionally, many people have suffered respiratory problems due to the cold weather and have incurred bodily injuries caused by icy conditions. The freeze has also caused great hardships to the county's homeless population and to other residents who do not have the means to keep warm.

County disaster officials are continuing to quantify damage related to the cold snap. Preliminary estimates are expected to skyrocket as soon as damage estimates from all of the county's communities and businesses are tabulated.