

our **Opinion**

Bush should provide drought aid

Our view: Disaster relief is the federal government's responsibility.

Come on, Mr. President! Help us out! That's the message the White House needs to be getting from farmers, ranchers, businesspeople, government officials and others on the Northern Plains. This year's drought is serious. The Red River Valley is as dry as it's been in a dozen years and hotter than almost anyone living can remember. Local farmers are surviving on hope and a better-than-expected wheat crop developed on good subsoil moisture early in the season. But that subsoil moisture is gone, and it's not being replaced. Grand Forks has had 17 inches of rain in the last two months — less than a third of the normal and barely a tenth of what fell in the same period last year.

The implications for later crops, including potatoes, beans and sugar beets — Red River Valley's richest crop — are dire if it doesn't rain soon. In fact, some producers at the western fringes of the valley are reported to be plowing under their crops.

This is a bleak picture — but it's a far brighter picture than the one facing producers farther west. South-central North Dakota is at the epicenter of drought that now affects much of the Great Plains. In that area — south and east of Bismarck — crops are lost and ranchers are selling off their herds.

The drought there is historic, at least as bad as the droughts of the late 1950s and the late 1980s and comparable to what happened in the 1930s.

There's a big difference, though. In those earlier droughts, farmers had a sympathetic president.

Not so this time.

Drought relief just isn't on George Bush's agenda.

Some members of Congress have tried to help, including those representing states on the Northern Plains. A proposal for nearly \$4 billion in drought aid has been bottled up, however, because the president opposes it.

It's true that Bush hasn't said "no" emphatically. It's also true that he's done what he can to keep drought relief from happening. In effect, he's turned a blind eye to drought. It's uncomfortably similar to the blind eye he initially turned to victims of Hurricane Katrina last August. The catastrophe grew so large that Bush couldn't continue to ignore it, however, and the administration did provide relief (though its timeliness and effectiveness remain in question).

Drought in the Dakotas and elsewhere on the Plains has reached the level of disaster, and farmers and ranchers deserve the same kind of response that victims of other disasters have received. Of course, this includes residents of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks, who benefited from government generosity during the Flood of 1997.

Disaster relief is the federal government's responsibility. No city, county or state is rich enough to provide help in a disaster as large as this drought. Nor is any private agency equipped to do it.

So, come on, Mr. President! Step up and help. It's the right thing to do.

It's morally right

It's right from the point of view of good government thing to do.

And it's politically the right thing to do, as well.

— Mike Jacobs for the Herald