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Drought disaster aid sought

Southeast's parched soil leaves farmers looking for help from neighbors, taxpayers

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WASHINGTON -- Edward Ellison hauls 1,000 gallons of water to his Greenwood farm every three days for his cattle because the drought has dried the two streams on his property.

"It's either that or sell your cows, and I don't want to do that," he said. "I don't think I would do this for two years."

Ellison's neighbors fill his tank for free, but he doesn't expect that to last forever. He also faces higher feed costs because lower yields from dry soil has more than doubled hay prices.

Last week, the U.S. Department of Agriculture designated 33 South Carolina counties natural disaster areas, including Greenville, Spartanburg and Pickens. The move offers low-interest loans to farmers but doesn't provide grants.

Advertisement To further help farmers, 54 lawmakers from South Carolina and the Southeast have asked the Bush administration to include disaster relief funds in the upcoming supplemental spending bill to pay for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the money was not in the \$46 billion spending bill offered to Congress this week. Southeast lawmakers still want to add federal drought aid to legislation, and North Carolina Gov. Mike Easley and representatives from four states told the House Agriculture Committee about drought problems this week.

"Our farmers need more money," Easley said. "They do not need more loans that they will be unable to repay when their crops fail to bring in enough income," he told the panel.

The supplemental funding bill is devoted to the war on terrorism, said Sean Kevelighan, a White House spokesman. He couldn't speculate on whether there would be another supplemental bill to address Southern drought relief.

"I'm very supportive of a supplemental that would provide assistance to farmers affected by the drought," said Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest. "It's a serious situation. Georgia is in similar straits."

Rep. J. Gresham Barrett, R-Westminster, supported the low-income loans offered by the USDA but declined to state a position on drought grants to farmers, said spokeswoman Brecke Latham.

Some parts of the state have lost 85 percent of their forage areas due to drought, said John Andrae, a Clemson University extension forages specialist. South Carolina farmers have reached out to Oklahoma and Pennsylvania to buy hay, and the price has gone from a typical average of about \$30 per roll to \$85, he said.

While some farmers are selling parts of their herds to cut feeding costs, others may just sell out, he said.

"I've been on some extremely dry farms where there's danger of people going out of business," Andrae said. "It's very serious."

Gene Cornett said the drought and high hay prices might drive him out of his cattle business in Piedmont because he doesn't see the water situation getting better. He only raises about 50 cows but said the outlook for rain continues to be bleak through spring, and longer-term water shortages loom.

"My small herd won't affect anything, but it's just symptomatic of what's going on" with smaller farmers, he said. "We're fighting in the Middle East over oil right now. Water is going to be the next fight in the next 20 years."
