

# Ag is united in the face of adversity

## The fall season signifies a change.

Colors explode on our trees, while crisp mornings and the precious opportunities for a warm day combine for a special time in Oregon.

While I am a boy of summer, the fall has always been my favorite time of year. My two daughters are away at college, the hard work in the yard is paying off, and football Saturdays are in full swing at my alma mater.

But while I am a “glass half full” person, the past year has been chock full of significant challenges, not only to the nursery and greenhouse industry, but all of Oregon agriculture.

It is under this enormous duress that we see what organizations are made of. I am pleased that we remain as one.

## Multiple generational disasters

The Oregon agricultural community has endured multiple once-in-a-generation challenges. Individually, they are tough, but cumulatively, they are threatening.

We are asking the state for targeted assistance to help Oregon’s agricultural community weather this unprecedented time, and to help our farm and ranch families build the resiliency to adapt to the more frequent disasters that are expected in the coming years.

As the agricultural community was working hard to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic by protecting their workforce, navigating market disruptions, and adjusting to a post-COVID economy, producers were hit by a series of natural disasters. These included wildfires, an ice storm, and drought, followed by last summer’s heat dome.

At this point, there is not a producer in Oregon who has not been negatively impacted by natural disasters in the past year. These disasters are also affecting our workforce, causing workers to miss days. Farmers are experiencing delays in production or harvesting their crops.

Several agricultural industries have banded together in a large coalition to educate state decision-makers on the

cumulative impacts of various disasters over the past year.

The OAN, Oregon Farm Bureau, Oregon Dairy Farmers Association, Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, Oregon Wine Growers Association and a dozen others wrote a letter making the case for state assistance to producers throughout the state. The state has \$150 million in disaster relief funding and Oregon ag is asking for a big chunk of that to go directly to operators.

## Gaps in federal programs

Unfortunately, we continue to see federal safety net programs for farmers fail to assist the diversity of commodities we raise in Oregon and the types of losses our producers have experienced over the past year.

Oregon is a specialty crop state. We grow more than 225 different crops, making our producers largely more diversified than much of the nation’s agriculture. However, it also means that many of the federal programs, which are designed primarily around Midwestern and Southern states’ needs, leave many Oregon producers ineligible for federal disaster relief.

The nursery industry discovered these holes firsthand in 2008, when snow and ice storms crushed the Willamette Valley.

Despite obtaining state and federal natural disaster declarations in quick order, gaps in the disaster title revealed a lack of understanding of specialty crops in two different ways. First, there is little flexibility in federal rules for multiple-year crops, and second, not all damage is immediate, like you see with a wheat crop failure. All the government could assist with was to pay for the mangled hoop houses throughout the industry.

In many cases, the federal programs that exist do not cover the losses experienced by producers. For example, resulting from the February 2021 ice storm and June 2021 heat dome, many tree and vine producers sought assistance from the USDA Tree Assistance Program (TAP). However, to receive TAP payments, a stand of eligible trees, bushes, or vines must have suffered more than a 15% mortality loss (over normal mortality) due to a declared natural disaster.

In both the ice storm and heat dome,



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the majority of trees, bushes, or vines didn’t suffer mortality, but their fruit or nuts didn’t survive. In the case of nursery stock, they too didn’t suffer complete mortality, but sunburn, cracked branches, and other impacts left plants with no value. They didn’t die, but from the grower’s perspective, they might as well have.

There may be programs that cover losses in other cases, but they require funding, and in some cases, adjustments to coverage. For farmers who suffer direct wildfire and drought losses, the Wildfire Hurricane Indemnity Program (WHIP+) assists eligible producers for crops, trees, bushes, and vines. The Quality Loss Adjustment Enhancement provides further support for producers suffering losses in crop quality.

However, these programs need to be authorized and have funds appropriated each disaster year, which has proven difficult even in years with the unprecedented weather events we have experienced, leaving growers with no relief in sight.

## We are one

I am a big fan of the aggie family meeting amongst the associations. The leaders of associations, regardless of size, are working together. We share a common bond to help our members to prosper and have a game-plan during times of adversity.

Regardless of the type and form of the effort, take note that your volunteer leaders and association staff are working extremely hard at the state and federal level to provide resources in response to the preponderance of disasters the Pacific Northwest faced these past two years. We will not rest until the work is done. ©