By The Associated Press

Farmers in the Southeast need immediate help, beyond loans they can’t pay off, for the drought that has dried up their crops, farmers and state officials told a federal task force Monday in the midst of a triple-digit heat wave already blamed for 27 deaths.

"The farmers are absolutely broke," Frank Strickland, who grows tobacco near Lakeland, Ga., told the panel. "We’re going to see farmers walk into the bank, throw their papers on the desk and tell the banker, ‘Here - take it.’ And rural banks can’t handle that."

Crop losses in the Southeast’s worst drought in 100 years are estimated at up to $700 million in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia alone. The drought is also withering crops in parts of Alabama, northern Florida and parts of Delaware and Maryland.

Some major Georgia rivers are flowing at less than 40 percent of normal flow, and scattered towns in the Southeast have imposed water-use restrictions.

In addition, temperatures have been near or above 100 degrees for 15 days in parts of the Carolinas and Georgia.

Although scattered thunderstorms cooled some parts of the region Monday, the official high for the 48 contiguous states was a record 106 in Macon, Ga.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture task force, headed by Assistant Agriculture Secretary George Dunlop, met with Georgia officials and toured an Alabama farm. They also planned to study farms in the Carolinas.

“We’re heading for one of the worst disasters Southeastern agriculture has ever experienced,” Rep. Lindsay Thomas, who represents southeast Georgia, told the group. "I don't know of anyone with a crop in the ground and a considerable investment in it who can survive this without outside help."

Politicians and farmers asked Dunlop for money, livestock feed and debt restructuring.

“We don’t need any low-interest loans,” said U.S. Sen. Mack Mattingly. “What we’re looking for is free commodities, surplus commodities.”

Dunlop touted the Federal Emergency Feed Assistance Program, which provides surplus commodities at low cost, but said there is “no provision in the law” for free commodities.

“We have to recognize that the farm bill provides $22 billion worth of freebies this year, and many farmers qualify for these subsidies,” Dunlop said. Dunlop said farmers could use Farmers Home Administration loans ranging from 5 percent interest to 8 percent to “repackage their loan portfolios.”

“What we need . . . is relief on this interest,” said Buddy Leger, who grows melons and pecans near Cordele, Ga. “As we’re going right now, a man who is able to stay on his farm is not going to have enough equity in it to borrow the money to make it another year.”

Dunlop said later while visiting V.C. Martin’s cattle ranch near Montgomery, Ala., that decisions on most drought disaster aid would not come until late summer or early fall.

Martin said his ranch is producing only about 20 percent of the hay he needs to feed 400 cattle, and that buying feed at $165 a ton is eating up any profit he might have made.

Two Air Force cargo jets took off for South Carolina Monday with hay donated by farmers in Illinois and other Midwestern states. A third trip was scheduled Tuesday to Georgia, with another flight planned Wednesday.