Farmland damage said $10 million

By The Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA — Although the flooding in Louisiana wasn't as bad as expected, it has caused about $10 million in agricultural damage, officials said Wednesday.

More than 100,000 acres of cropland have been flooded in central Louisiana, and more will probably go under, said Farm Bureau Federation President Ronnie Anderson.

“There's no doubt that this can be considered a disaster, and we're going to ask Congress, as well as Secretary of Agriculture Clayton Yeutter, to declare it so.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which operates flood-control dams, warned when the flooding started that 350,000 acres of farmland could be flooded. With cleanup under way, authorities count fewer than 110,000 flooded acres because levees held.

Janet Merritt, chief of disaster services in Louisiana, said about 110 homes sustained damage in five parishes, and counts from six others affected by flooding haven't been made.

She said only two parishes apparently will qualify for a federal disaster declaration — which would make small business loans to companies or individuals who did not have flood insurance. She did not say which ones.

On the other hand, she said, it is probable that low-cost federal loans would be made available to the farmers in all 11 parishes where flooding has caused agricultural damage.

“In the initial phase we thought we'd have a lot more land and a lot more crops under than today, although the guy that had his cotton and wheat wiped out has a real disaster,” said state Agriculture Secretary Bob Odom.

“After a beautiful spring, we had some excellent crops in the field,” he said. “It was shaping up to be a perfect beginning of the crop year until the rain started over in Texas.”

Odom and other farming officials stopped in Alexandria as part of an aerial tour of the flooded regions.

Larry Michaud, spokesman for the state agriculture department, said cotton, corn, milo and winter wheat were the crops hit hardest by flood waters.

The flooding also forced ranchers to relocate about 10,000 head of cattle to higher ground.

After flying over the Red River last week, Gov. Buddy Roemer sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture asking for disaster aid for Caddo, Bossier, DeSoto, Red River, Natchitoches, Winn, Grant, Rapides, Avoyelles, Catahoula and Concordia parishes.

The flood damage followed the devastating December freeze which caused more than $250 million in damage to the sugar industry. Odom said some cane growers had so little left that they had to buy cane to plant.

Anderson said the damage calls attention to the need for comprehensive federal crop insurance.

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“We feel the program should be multi-peril to protect farmers against risks like flooding and the December freeze,” he said.

The water is going down in Shreveport, where the city spent about $40,000 in flood control over the past few weeks.

“As a community, we could have fared considerably worse,” said Public Works Director Tom Dark.

Only nine occupied homes in the city were flooded, Dark said. Still undetermined, however, is just how badly the city’s parks were damaged. Part of the jogging trail in Hamel Memorial Park was lost to the Red River, and water remains in much of Bickham Dickson Park.

Mayor John Hussey said the city’s success with the flood is attributed to the foresight of residents in approving $80 million in drainage system improvements over the past decade.

In the farmlands where the Red and Black rivers converge, wheat farmers are harvesting their crops in a race against time.

Avoyelles Parish farmers, who escaped the rising Red River by building a temporary levee, are afraid they won’t be so lucky when new floods back up over their lands.

This time it will be the runoff from heavy rains to the north, which is pushing downstream.

“It's filling up down here already,” said farmer Audrey Dupuy.

The 12-mile levee is protecting about 20,000 acres of wheat and recently planted corn and dozens of homes from the Red River, said Avoyelles Parish Civil Defense Director Cindy Dupuy.

The levee, constructed with the help of the National Guard, is about five feet high in most areas.

The Red’s stage Tuesday at Acme, near Brouillette, was 43.2 feet. Flood stage is 48 feet. The river is expected to crest at 48 feet on June 6.

“If it wasn’t for that little levee that they built, there would be five feet of water in those fields right now,” Dupuy said. “There’s nothing they can do about the backwater.”