

‘Destructive’ freeze leaves Maryland farmers seeking federal relief

Spring cold snap halted growth, with some areas losing more than 90% of crops



Brad Thompson, of Foxborough Nursery, shows damaged crops from the April 21 freeze. Thompson is standing among rows of 6-year-old Japanese Laceleaf Maples. (Jeffrey F. Bill/Staff)



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Maryland farmers, grappling with the fallout from a “destructive” [April freeze](#), are asking for federal assistance to recoup their substantial crop losses.

“We’ve been in business since 1978 and we have never suffered a loss to this degree,” said Brad Thompson, owner of Foxborough Nursery in Harford County, which he said had losses in the millions of dollars.

Multiple Maryland jurisdictions lost 94% of their apple crops, 98% of their barley crops and 99% of their peach crops, the state's Farm Service estimated, according to a **letter** from Gov. Wes Moore's office. The Maryland Wineries Association also reported 36% of the state's grape acreage was lost.

The Maryland Farm Bureau, the state's entire congressional delegation and Moore have sent letters urging the U.S. Department of Agriculture to issue disaster declarations for the 10 counties impacted by the freeze. If granted, the declaration would allow farmers to receive federal assistance, such as grants and loans, to help with the production losses.

The jurisdictions affected by the freeze, according to the Maryland Farm Bureau, are Montgomery, Frederick, Carroll, Baltimore, Howard, Anne Arundel, Harford, Washington, Prince George's and Calvert counties.

Effects of freeze

After several days of 80- and 90-degree heat, the morning of April 21 saw temperatures drop into the 20s in some regions of the state.

"It woke all plants up, had them start pulling energy and starting to get ready to bloom, and thinking it was the middle end of May, and then snap overnight ... which ultimately caused everything to freeze and die overnight," said Tyler Hough, director of government relations for the Maryland Farm Bureau.

The freeze damaged crops in farms and nurseries growing peaches, trees, grapes and a range of other crops. Hough said a freeze this damaging hasn't occurred in recent memory.

Thompson said trees at his nursery had already started this year's growth when the frost came, killing younger trees and burning off new growth. Acres of trees lost about a year's worth of growth, he said.

"All plants are under an extremely high level of stress due to the freeze," Thompson said. "The fear is that if we have a hot, dry summer, will these older, larger, more established plants ... have enough left in them, enough reserves to withstand a drought and more stress?"

In Moore's **letter** to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins, the governor wrote that "the scale of this climate event exceeds local and state recovery capacities." After the freeze, the state lifted a restriction on the amount of Maryland-grown ingredients required for winery licenses, promoted farmer education resources, and encouraged residents to support local farms.

The Maryland Farm Bureau surveyed its farmers, 90 of whom reported at least a 67.5% loss in production due to the freeze.

Robert Black, one of the owners of **Catoctin Mountain Orchard** in Frederick County, said the freeze led to significant losses on his family farm. About 75% of the orchard's 24 acres of peaches and 26 acres of apples won't grow fruit this year, Black said.

"We've had some later crops, but never this destructive," Black said.

Black hopes people will still come to the orchard to purchase the fruit he is able to harvest, despite the lower volume his customers are used to. The farmer said he's not "holding his breath" for federal assistance.

John Minetola, owner of Mise En Place Farm in Anne Arundel County, said the April freeze added to the already difficult spring weather this year. About 20% of Minetola's eggplants were lost during the freeze, he said, in addition to losses in peppers, kale and some fruits.

"It's been a very challenging spring," Minetola said.

Many crops, he said, were slowed in their growth and now require more work to keep them alive. Replanting crops that were damaged by the temperature drop has also added to labor costs.

Minetola said he was able to prevent some losses by using frost covers and maintaining a diverse crop selection, including plants like radishes that have performed well in colder conditions.

Federal assistance

A disaster declaration would allow farmers in these counties to apply for federal loans to replace up to all of their production or physical losses up to \$500,000. The disaster declaration typically requires at least a 30% production loss of one crop in a region.

On May 26, Pennsylvania farmers received a disaster declaration for the same freeze event. U.S. Rep. April McClain Delaney, a Democrat representing parts of Montgomery County and Western Maryland, asked Agriculture Secretary Rollins if she could commit to granting the same relief for Maryland farmers.

"Ensure that politics do not impact the economic viability or safety and health and well-being of our farmers or of all of our Americans," McClain Delaney said during a Thursday House Agriculture Committee hearing.

Rollins said she would follow up with McClain Delaney. The congresswoman's team said Tuesday that the USDA has not responded, other than confirming receipt of the letter from the Maryland Congressional delegation.

The USDA did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Last year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency **denied a request** for a disaster declaration, and therefore federal aid, after a damaging flood in Western Maryland. Thirteen Maryland counties received a disaster designation from the USDA earlier this year due to drought, allowing farmers to apply for loans to recoup losses from the dry conditions since last November.

The Maryland congressional delegation, including nine Democrats and Republican Andy Harris, also requested that the federal government supply emergency relief to farmers as soon as possible.

Have a news tip? Contact Katharine Wilson at kwilson@baltsun.com.