



**Joint Informational Hearing
Assembly Agriculture Committee and
Assembly Emergency Management Committee**

Winter Storm Impact on California Agriculture

**May 23, 2023
2:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.
State Capitol, Room 444**

Welcome and Opening Remarks

- Robert Rivas, Chair, Assembly Agriculture
- Freddie Rodriguez, Chair, Assembly Emergency Management
- Other Members

Panel 1: Statewide Overview of Winter storm Impacts

- Ryan Buras, Deputy Director, Recovery Operations, Office of Emergency Services
- Christine Birdsong, Undersecretary, California Department of Food and Agriculture
- Laura Hollender, J.D., Executive Advisor, Flood Management and Dam Safety, Department of Water Resources
- Jim Houston, Administrator, California Farm Bureau Federation

Panel 2: Impacts, Difficulties and Solutions

- Peter Navarro, owner, Navarro Farms – Watsonville, CA
- Phil Hansen, Dairy Farmer, Hansen Ranches – Corcoran, CA
- Sarah Dozer, owner, Winter Sister Farm – Sebastopol, CA
- Luz Rodriguez, Displaced Farmworker, Royal Oaks Farms – Pajaro, CA

Panel 3: Prevention and Mitigation Measures

- Norm Groot, Executive Director, Monterey County Farm Bureau
- Professor Nicholas Pinter, Associate Director of the UC Davis Center for Watershed Sciences

Joint Information Hearing on 2022-23 Winter Storm Impact on Agriculture in California

Assembly Agriculture Committee and Assembly Emergency Management Committee

Briefing Document

Over View

Starting in late December 2022, Californians suffered through historic levels of rain and snow that flooded roads and homes, forced evacuations and cut power to millions. Almost the entire state received 400% to 600% of its typical average rainfall between Christmas 2022 and mid-January 2023. Since late December 2022, California has endured at least 12 atmospheric river storms, corridors of air that can carry massive amounts of water over thousands of miles, producing cascading impacts including landslides, sinkholes and downed trees that damaged roads and homes.

A winter storm in late February 2023 produced feet of snow across the state, trapping people in their homes and vehicles and leading to dozens of rescues. California's Office of Emergency Services deployed the California National Guard to help dig out snowbound communities in the mountains. Rain and snow battered large parts of California once again on March 10, resulting in the deaths of at least two people, according to California Office of Emergency Services Director Nancy Ward. The storm brought significant snow totals to communities in the Sierra Nevada range, leaving thousands of households without power for essential light and heat.

The repeated events accumulate on one another and worsen disaster impacts while also impeding recovery efforts. While clearing debris, providing shelter and supporting other immediate needs are important, philanthropy should consider longer-term recovery needs now and how to strengthen resilience. On April 3, President Biden approved California's request for a major disaster declaration to support recovery efforts from the storms beginning Feb. 21 and continuing. Earlier in 2023, California secured a major disaster declaration in response to severe storms that began in late December.

These multiple atmospheric river events that have come through the area have impacted the production of a variety of different crops. Strawberries in particular have taken a substantial hit, as the area accounts for approximately one-third of strawberry acreage in California.

California Strawberry Commission President Rick Tomlinson has stated *"Farms face a massive cleanup. As soon as the cleanup is complete, farmers will begin the process of preparing the fields and starting over. For the farms that were flooded, this catastrophe hit at the worst possible time. Farmers had borrowed money to prepare the fields and were weeks away from beginning to harvest. Disaster relief and emergency financial assistance will be critical for both the residential community and the farming operations."*

Monterey County has shared the findings of a survey documenting the agricultural impacts of March's devastating storms, revealing a total of \$264 million in current and projected future losses across the county as a result of storm and flood damage. More than 8,700 acres of crops were destroyed or unable to be planted due to flooding, according to the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office. Half of those acres were "newly impacted" and not documented in the county's previous January storm survey, which recorded \$336 million in damages across more than 15,700 acres.

Combined, the winter storms cost the county's agricultural sector some \$600 million in losses and impacted over 20,000 crop acres. The March survey found that strawberry crops were "significantly affected" by flooding in the Pajaro Valley, one of the region's main berry-growing areas. Strawberry growers saw more than 1,900 acres damaged and suffered losses totaling \$160 million. Other impacted commodities across the county included lettuces, with \$54.4 million in losses and vegetable crops like broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower, which saw \$24.2 million in losses.

Monterey County Farm Bureau Executive Director Norm Groot said that planting in the area had already been delayed by the January storms. With additional flooding and adverse conditions, planting schedules will continue to be negatively impacted. Adding to the challenges, another series of rain events is forecasted over the next 10 days. Even after the rain eventually stops and floodwater recedes, it will take some time before farms can resume normal operations.

In the central valley numerous farmers, workers and residents are coping with acres of floodwaters and muck, tallying the damage. Tulare Lake which has been mostly dry for decades, now covers miles of farmland and is threatening to overwhelm nearby communities. The lake has wrapped itself around the southern and western sides of Corcoran, so the community is now completely dependent on the levees designed to box in and protect this pocket of land. It probably will be for some time to come. Corcoran is the largest single community threatened by the flooded lake. The historic snowpack in the Sierra Nevada may cause serious issues. As it melts, the lake could triple in size by summer, threatening the surrounding communities and costing billions in losses.

Furthermore, due to the recent storms, farmworkers are facing new housing challenges. The series of atmospheric river storms breached levees across the state, inundating the farmworker community of Pajaro, and returning Tulare Lake to the Central Valley. Flooding in the valley is expected to worsen as the historic snowpack melts. This inundation could affect farmworker communities in two ways: directly, by damaging homes and/or triggering the evacuations of thousands, and indirectly, by flooding fields and idling workers. Both the National Agricultural Workers Survey and a recent UC Merced study show that a large majority of farmworkers are renters rather than owners, and covering rent—and other essential living expenses—is likely to be harder with less work available.

CALIFORNIA'S EMERGENCY MANGEMENT SYSTEM

California's Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS): In order to respond to frequent and multiple disasters occurring anytime and anywhere in the state, it is important that emergency response agencies operate within a clear and consistent organizational structure. SEMS is the cornerstone of California's emergency response system and the fundamental structure for the response phase of emergency management. The system unifies all elements of California's emergency management community into a single integrated system and standardizes key elements. Elemental to SEMS are:

- 1) Incident Command System (ICS) - A field-level emergency response system based on management by objectives;
- 2) Multi/ Inter-agency coordination - Affected agencies working together to coordinate allocations of resources and emergency response activities;
- 3) Mutual aid - A system for obtaining additional emergency resources from non-affected jurisdictions; and
- 4) Operational Area Concept - County and its sub-divisions to coordinate damage information, resource requests and emergency response.

Emergency Management Mutual Aid (EMMA) System: The purpose of EMMA system is to provide emergency management personnel and technical specialists to support the disaster operations of affected jurisdictions during an emergency. One of the primary objectives is to provide emergency management personnel and technical specialists from unaffected areas to support local jurisdictions, Operational Areas (OAs), and regional emergency operations during emergencies.

Federal Disaster Declaration Types

There are two types of disaster declarations provided for in the Stafford Act: emergency declarations and major disaster declarations. Both declaration types authorize the President to provide supplemental federal disaster assistance. However, the events related to the two different types of declaration and scope and amount of assistance differ. The State of California, for the two recent winter storm incidents, first requested an emergency declaration and subsequently requested a major disaster declaration.

Emergency Declarations

The President can declare an emergency for any occasion or instance when the President determines federal assistance is needed. Emergency declarations supplement State and local or Indian tribal government efforts in providing emergency services, such as the protection of lives, property, public health, and safety, or to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in any part of

the United States. The total amount of assistance provided for in a single emergency may not exceed \$5 million. The President shall report to Congress if this amount is exceeded.

Assistance Available Under Emergency Declarations

Public Assistance (PA) – Only Categories A (debris removal) and B (emergency protective measures) may be authorized under an emergency declaration. Categories C-G (permanent work) are not available under an emergency declaration. Emergency declarations often include only Category B and will typically be limited to direct federal assistance, absent damage assessments showing significant need for financial assistance. This assistance is generally provided on a 75% federal, 25% non-federal cost sharing basis.

Individual Assistance (IA) – The Individuals and Households Program (IHP) is the only form of IA that may be authorized under an emergency declaration. According to FEMA, authorization of IHP under an emergency is rare. Housing Assistance under IHP is provided at a 100% federal share, while Other Needs Assistance under IHP requires a 25% non-federal cost share.

Pre-Disaster Emergency Declarations

A Governor or Tribal Chief Executive may request an emergency declaration in advance or anticipation of the imminent impact of an incident that threatens such destruction as could result in a major disaster. Such requests must meet all of the statutory and regulatory requirements for an emergency declaration request. Requests must demonstrate the existence of critical emergency protective measure needs prior to impact are beyond the capability of the State and affected local governments or Indian tribal government and identify specific unmet emergency needs that can be met through DFA. Such DFA may include, but is not limited to, personnel, equipment, supplies, and evacuation assistance. Pre-positioning of assets generally does not require a declaration. Assistance made available under a pre-disaster emergency declaration will typically be Category B (emergency protective measures), limited to DFA.

Major Disaster Declarations

The President can declare a major disaster for any natural event, including any hurricane, tornado, storm, high water, wind-driven water, tidal wave, tsunami, earthquake, volcanic eruption, landslide, mudslide, snowstorm, or drought, or, regardless of cause, fire, flood, or explosion, that the President determines has caused damage of such severity that it is beyond the combined capabilities of state and local governments to respond. A major disaster declaration provides a wide range of federal assistance programs for individuals and public infrastructure, including funds for both emergency and permanent work.

Assistance Available Under Major Disaster Declarations

Not all programs, however, are activated for every disaster. The determination of which programs are authorized is based on the types of assistance specified in the Governor or Tribal

Chief Executive's request and the needs identified during the joint PDA and subsequent PDAs. FEMA disaster assistance programs are as follows:

FEMA's Individual Assistance Program

When a disaster occurs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) may assist individuals with their recovery through the Individual Assistance (IA) program if the President authorizes such assistance pursuant to a declaration of emergency or major disaster under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.

Individual Assistance (IA) Programs

FEMA may provide the following forms of IA:

The Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) provides grant funding to local, state, territory, and tribal governments, which may contract with local mental health service providers, for CCP services. The CCP assists individuals and communities through community-based outreach and the provision of psycho-educational services following an emergency or major disaster.

Disaster Case Management (DCM) partners case managers with disaster survivors to develop and implement disaster recovery plans that address the survivor's unmet needs following a major disaster.

Disaster Legal Services (DLS) are provided for free to low-income individuals to assist them with securing benefits or making claims arising from a major disaster.

Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) provides unemployment benefits and re-employment assistance to individuals who are ineligible for regular unemployment insurance, and were previously employed or self-employed, and rendered jobless or whose employment was interrupted, as a direct result of a major disaster.

The Individuals and Households Program (IHP) provides financial and/or direct assistance for housing, as well as financial assistance for other needs (referred to as Other Needs Assistance (ONA)), to eligible individuals and households who have uninsured or under-insured necessary expenses and serious needs resulting from an emergency or major disaster, which cannot be met through other means or forms of assistance.

Public Assistance Programs

Assistance to State, Tribal, and local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency work and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged facilities, which may include the following Categories:

A - Debris removal

- B - Emergency protective measures
- C – Roads and bridges
- D – Water control facilities
- E – Buildings and equipment
- F – Utilities
- G – Parks, recreational and other facilities

Hazard Mitigation Assistance

Assistance to State, Tribal, and local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for actions taken to prevent or reduce long term risk to life and property from natural hazards.

Factors FEMA Considers When Evaluating a Governor’s Request

According to Cal OES, there are several factors FEMA considers when evaluating a Governor’s request for a major Presidential Disaster Declaration. Cal OES has recently indicated there is a statewide threshold of 1,200 individual homes being damaged or destroyed to qualify for federal individual assistance programs and over \$100 million in damages to public infrastructure to merit a federal major Presidential Disaster Declaration.

However, there are several other factors FEMA considers in determining whether or not to recommend the President declares a major Presidential Disaster Declaration.

Individual Assistance Factors:

1. State Fiscal Capacity and Resource Availability – per capita personnel income by locality
2. Uninsured home and personnel property losses
3. Disaster Impacted Population profile – i.e. – is there an increased need for federal assistance?
4. Impact to Community Infrastructure – disruption to “life-saving and life-sustaining infrastructure” – i.e. – sewer systems
5. Disaster Related Unemployment – number of individuals who may have lost work and impact to major employers.

Public Assistance Factors:

1. **Estimated Cost of the Assistance:** FEMA assesses the estimated cost of PA, generally using a Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA) when considering whether to recommend that PA be authorized. In FY2022, the per-capita threshold across a state or territory requesting PA is \$1.63, and across a county is \$4.10.
2. **Localized Impacts:** FEMA may authorize PA in cases of severe, concentrated damages, even when the statewide per capita threshold is not met.
3. **Insurance Coverage in Force:** FEMA reduces the estimated cost of PA based on the actual or required insurance coverage for PA-eligible work.
4. **Hazard Mitigation:** FEMA considers how mitigation measures may have reduced the cumulative value of damages. To encourage community resilience efforts, FEMA may authorize PA even when estimated damages do not meet the per capita thresholds because of mitigation measures.
5. **Recent Multiple Disasters:** FEMA considers the effects of recent disasters within the disaster-affected jurisdiction to assess need. FEMA considers incidents that received presidential or gubernatorial declarations. i.e. – the recent storms in January.

Sandy Recovery Improvement Act (SRIA) of 2013 (Public Law 113-2).

Section 1109 of SRIA requires FEMA, in cooperation with State, local, and Tribal emergency management agencies, to review, update, and revise through rulemaking the factors found at 44 CFR 206.48 that FEMA uses to determine whether to recommend provision of Individual Assistance (IA) during a major disaster. These factors help FEMA measure the severity, magnitude, and impact of a disaster, as well as the capabilities of the affected jurisdictions.

On June 1, 2019 a final rule issued FEMA became effective to comply with SRIA and to provide clarity on the IA declaration factors that FEMA currently considers in support of its recommendation to the President on whether a major disaster declaration authorizing IA is warranted. The additional clarity may reduce delays in the declaration process by decreasing the back and forth between States and FEMA during the declaration process. The final rule added new factors to help FEMA more accurately and consistently determine whether the impact of an event is beyond State and local government capabilities.

According to FEMA, “No single data point or factor will be determinative of FEMA's recommendation nor will any single factor necessarily affect the President's ultimate determination of whether a major disaster declaration authorizing IA is warranted.” During the rulemaking process FEMA indicated “disaster events can vary greatly from incident to incident,

and FEMA must retain the flexibility and discretion to properly advise the President regarding situations or circumstances that FEMA may not be able to fully predict or define in a rulemaking. FEMA wants to ensure that we retain as much flexibility as possible. The final factors do not limit the President's discretion regarding major disaster declarations.”

During the rule making process FEMA stated, “FEMA strongly believes States are ultimately responsible for the well-being of their citizens and that States have a responsibility to plan for disasters, pre-identify funding and resources, and to provide assistance to their citizens after a disaster. This should include the establishment, funding, and improvement of State-level individual assistance programs. However, FEMA has not been able to develop a methodology which would effectively and consistently evaluate the State Services and Planning After Prior Disasters sub-factors to incentivize States to establish individual assistance programs or to plan and implement lessons learned from previous disasters. As a result, at this time, FEMA is unable to effectively incentivize these activities through the declarations process, and specifically in the evaluation of disaster requests. FEMA will continue to explore opportunities to encourage States to develop their own individual assistance programs.”

RECENT DISASTERS IN CALIFORNIA

1) The magnitude 6.4 earthquake off the Northern California coastline near the City of Ferndale in Humboldt County, which the Governor proclaimed a state of emergency for on December 20, 2022.

The Governor’s Proclamation of a State of Emergency noted multiple earthquake aftershocks, the displacement of hundreds of individuals, multiple injuries and two fatalities, road closures, widespread power outages, and damages to critical lifeline infrastructure, including water lines and gas lines.

Despite the severe impact to local infrastructure in Humboldt County, Cal OES determined the disaster conditions did not meet the criteria for requesting federal assistance through a major Presidential Disaster Declaration. However, on January 5, 2023, Cal OES announced the U.S. Small Business Administration’s (SBA) approval of the state’s request to seek financial aid for Humboldt County and neighboring counties for an emergency declaration in response to the magnitude-6.4 earthquake near Ferndale on December 20, 2022.

The emergency declaration makes homeowners, renters, business owners and certain private non-profit organizations in Humboldt County, as well as the contiguous counties of Del Norte, Mendocino, Siskiyou and Trinity, eligible to apply for low-interest disaster loans to help cover losses due to the earthquake.

2) The December 27, 2022 to January 31, 2023 incident known as the, “California Severe Winter Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides DR-4683-CA,” which was declared on January 14, 2023.

According to FEMA, individuals and households in the following designated counties are eligible to apply for financial and direct services under the federal **individual assistance** programs: Alameda, Amador, Calaveras, Contra Costa, Mendocino, Merced, Monterey, Sacramento, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, and Ventura.

Additionally, the following state, local, tribal and territorial governments and certain private-non-profit organizations in these designated counties are eligible for **public assistance** for emergency work and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged facilities: Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Inyo, Los Angeles, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Mendocino, Merced, Monterey, Napa, Nevada, Placer, Sacramento, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, Ventura, and Yolo.

3) The February 21, 2023 and continuing incident known as the, “California Severe Winter Storms, Straight-line Winds, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides DR-4699-CA,” which was declared on April 3, 2023.

According to FEMA, individuals and households in the following designated counties are eligible to apply for financial and direct services under the federal **individual assistance** programs: Kern, Mariposa, Monterey, San Benito, Santa Cruz, Tulare, and Tuolumne.

Additionally, the following state, local, tribal and territorial governments and certain private-non-profit organizations in these designated counties are eligible for **public assistance** for emergency work and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged facilities: Calaveras, Los Angeles, Monterey, and Tulare.

The California Disaster Assistance Act (CDAA): The CDAA authorizes the Director of the Cal OES to administer a disaster assistance program that provides financial assistance from the state for costs incurred by local governments as a result of a disaster event. CDAA provides for the reimbursement of local government costs including funding for the repair, restoration, or replacement of public real property damaged or destroyed by a disaster.

Federal and State cost share: For federally declared disasters, the federal government covers 75 percent of eligible reimbursed costs and the state and local governments cover the remaining 25 percent at 18.75 percent and 6.25 percent, respectively. For state declared disasters, the state covers 75 percent of total eligible costs and the local government’s share is 25 percent.

Individual Assistance Program in Other States: Several states offer or have offered assistance to individuals following a disaster.

Following Hurricane Michael in late 2018, Georgia announced and established the Disaster Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (DTANF) in 20 Georgia counties to support families as they continue to recover from the storm. Those determined eligible for assistance received one lump sum payment for the family size that was equal the sum of four months benefits. The program extended assistance to low-income families who suffered a loss of housing because of Hurricane Michael.

The State of Arkansas established a State Individual Assistance Program, as authorized by Arkansas Code Annotated 12-75-101. The Arkansas Department of Emergency Management administers the State Individual Assistance Program. Through the development of a disaster declaration and damage assessments, individuals may be eligible to receive disaster assistance. The assistance is for qualified homeowners/renters whose primary residence was damaged or destroyed in a declared designated area. If the damage exceeds the capabilities of local government, a state declaration will be requested through the Governor's Office.

The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency oversees an Office of Individual Assistance, which is comprised of their Housing Bureau and Disability Integration Advisor. The Office of Individual Assistance also works directly with the different volunteer organizations before, during and after a disaster. The Individual Assistance Program coordinates assistance provided to individuals, households, and businesses recovering from disaster or emergency impacts. After a severe weather event, the Office of Housing and Individual Assistance receives an influx of calls from residents of the impacted areas. If warranted, the IA Bureau will activate the Disaster Call Center to connect callers with the resources needed to return to pre-disaster status.

The State of Alaska's Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management administers an Individual Assistance (IA) Program, which includes the Individual and Family Grants (IFG) and Temporary Housing Grants (THG). IA provides financial assistance to disaster survivors through grants to assist individuals and families in the declared disaster area with serious losses not covered or not fully covered by their insurance or other financial sources or means. The mission of the Alaska Individual Assistance Program is to provide financial assistance to individuals or families whose: primary residence was destroyed or damaged; only means of transportation was destroyed or damaged, when alternative is not available; essential personal property was destroyed, damaged, or lost; and medical, funeral or dental expenses that were incurred as a direct result of the disaster.

Daily Focus - Governor Newsom Signs Executive Order to Support Ongoing Central Valley Flood Response

WHAT TO KNOW: Amid ongoing flood impacts in the Central Valley, the state is extending flood diversion flexibilities implemented for the Tulare Lake Basin to the San Joaquin River Basin as the latter faces increased flood risks due to snowmelt. Today's order finetunes flood diversion and groundwater recharge efforts based on the latest information and responds to a local request for Kern River floodwater to be allowed into the California Aqueduct to reduce flows into the Tulare Lake Basin.

SACRAMENTO – In response to the latest runoff conditions and flood impact modeling, Governor Gavin Newsom today signed an executive order updating and extending recent emergency actions to allow expedited floodwater diversion, debris removal, levee repairs and other flood preparation and response activities in the Tulare Lake and San Joaquin River Basins, and to allow diversion of floodwater for groundwater recharge purposes statewide.

Today's order extends to the San Joaquin River Basin floodwater diversion waivers included in a prior executive order covering the Tulare Lake Basin. The San Joaquin River Basin may face increased flood risk as the historic snowpack in the Sierra Nevada continues to melt. The order includes refined requirements for new flood diversion and groundwater recharge efforts in the Tulare Lake and San Joaquin River Basins to protect water quality, infrastructure and wildlife habitats.

“With flooding impacts expected to continue into the summer, California is committed to supporting robust preparation, response and recovery efforts in this hard-hit region, and to using floodwaters to recharge our critical groundwater supplies where it's safe to do so,” said Governor Newsom. “We'll continue working with local partners to protect lives and livelihoods on the ground while advancing investments to protect communities throughout the state from future flooding.”

At the request of the Kern River Watermaster, the order also facilitates diversions of water into the Kern River Intertie which connects to the California Aqueduct, a part of the State Water Project system. These diversions will reduce the amount of excess Kern River water that could otherwise contribute to flooding in the Tulare Lake Basin. State agencies are working with the Kern River Watermaster to implement the use of the intertie as soon as this week.

The full text of today's executive order can be found [here](#).



Credit: Killdeer Farms

Winter Storm Relief for Small Farmers

Request: \$5 million in emergency relief to cover the impacts of the winter storms on small-scale family farmers

Background: California has been pummeled by a series of winter storms since December 2022. While the rains provide needed drought relief, filling up reservoirs and watering thirsty crops, the intensity of the storms has negatively impacted family-scale farmers across California.

Due to the recent storms — including flooding and wind damage — small-scale family farmers have been forced to evacuate, leaving behind ruined fields, houses, and barns. Many have incurred thousands of dollars in damages to their homes and businesses, losing infrastructure, machinery, livestock, added-value products and crops. The future is uncertain; there will be dire and likely prolonged negative effects.

Problem: Federal support for impacted farmers — through U.S. Department of Agriculture and Federal Emergency Management Assistance — has been slow to materialize, and many growers are not insured or are underinsured, particularly for crop loss. For others, they are unable to reach (particularly due to immigration status or language) assistance or unable to wait for significant lags or delays in any public safety net resources; these local producers & community entrepreneurs are the heart of our local food systems and need public support to recover.

CAFF has provided \$186,000 in assistance to small farmers across the state through the California Family Farmer Emergency Fund, primarily through working with local community foundations, community groups and churches, since December. However, it's not enough to address the severity of storm impacts. For example, in our survey of Chinese-American growers in Santa Clara County, we identified \$2 million in uncovered losses, and in one town hall in San Benito County in February, more than 125 (mostly Spanish-speaking) farmers showed up seeking assistance for impacts.

Solution: California small assistance grants can be the stabilizing resource until farmers can recover from immediate impacts or secure federal aid. Over the past few years, California Department of Food & Agriculture's (CDFA) California Underserved and Small Producer (CUSP) Program has facilitated significant resources to small and underserved farmers, both for pandemic impacts and drought; CDFA has partnered with nonprofits to distribute \$3 million through 748 small grants, with 79% of funds going to BIPOC farmers. CAFF requests the legislature invest \$5 million through the CUSP program to cover winter storm impacts.

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The Guardian



Farm workers race to save lettuce fields in Salinas, California, in between atmospheric rivers in March. Photograph: The Washington Post/Getty Images

[California](#)

An immigrant farmer grew produce for restaurants. California floods ruined her crops

Government aid programs, set up to favor corporate farms, are out of reach to those who supply farmers markets and eateries

[Maanvi Singh](#) in Hollister, California

[@maanvissingh](#)

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The water came in a rush – tearing through planted rows of cabbage, broccoli and cauliflower before crashing into the tractors and farm equipment. Within hours, much of María Inés

Catalán's 41-acre (17-hectare) organic farm in Hollister, [California](#), had disappeared under several feet of water.

She had escaped just in time, as the flood waters gurgled into her trailer home. Now, three months after a series of storms, Catalán and her family are still counting their losses. Their dog, Flor, didn't make it, nor did the bees that Catalán had been tending for two years.

The farm's entire spring harvest – including the peas, beans and beets that she sells to James Beard-awarded restaurants in San Francisco and sends to food pantries across central California – was destroyed as well. “Everything went to waste. Everything was spoiled,” she said.

Frantic calls and emails to the US Department of Agriculture and state agencies have so far gone unanswered. A fundraising campaign has helped Catalán pay for immediate repairs, but she doesn't have enough to cover the land lease. “This is a tough business. Us small farmers, we develop a callus for losses, and I've lost before,” she said, “but this time I've lost everything.”



María Inés Catalán has a 41-acre organic farm that sells produce to San Francisco restaurants. During this winter's storms, she lost it all. Photograph: Maanvi Singh/The Guardian

A series of atmospheric river storms and widespread flooding this winter have wiped out hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland across California. But the state's small-scale, immigrant farmers have been especially hard hit. After a drawn-out drought, widespread wildfires and heatwaves in recent years, family farms like Catalán's had been struggling to get by even before the storms.

Many lack property and crop insurance, and are struggling to access emergency aid and navigate government systems and bureaucracies set up to favor large corporations. Undocumented farmers who built up their enterprises without any government subsidies or support, are mostly ineligible for disaster relief. Even those who do manage to apply for aid often cannot afford to wait months for the money to come through. Without immediate, emergency aid, many small farmers risk losing their lease, and their businesses.

“We hold up small farmers as essential, but they’re treated like they are dispensable,” said Irene de Barraicua, director of operations at the farmer and farm worker advocacy group Líderes Campesinas. California’s immigrant-run small farms are the ones that supply the state’s farmers markets and farm stands, its high-end, farm-to-fork restaurants and specialty groceries. Often, they grow specialty produce like lemongrass and heirloom chiles – to supply immigrant communities with ingredients that are otherwise scarce in the US, she said. “We need to fight to preserve these farms.”

Fires, drought and floods

For the past three months, Catalán has been staying at a makeshift county shelter at a housing complex for migrant farm workers. At the farm, nothing is quite as it was. For one, it’s eerily quiet – because Catalán cannot afford to pay employees, she and her family have been working triple the hours for no pay.

Her youngest, 11-year-old Miguel, wanders listlessly through the mucky fields, terrified that each time he goes to school, he’ll lose something else.

“All we have left now is my experience,” she said. Catalán, who came to the US from Guerrero, Mexico, in the 1980s, spent years picking produce for low wages before she decided to strike out on her own. She bartered cooking and cleaning services for her first half-acre (0.20-hectare) plot.

Eventually, she acquired an 80-acre (32-hectare) ranch – which she lost in 2014, amid a historic drought in California, when the farm’s well collapsed. After spending nearly a decade building a new farm, “we now have the opposite problem”, she said, shaking her head. “The hardest thing about farming here is the drastic climate,” she said. “You can win a year with a profit of \$400,000. Or you can lose a year with half a million in debt.”



A flooded farm near Strathmore, California, shows the extent small farms suffered during one of California's wettest winters on record. Photograph: David McNew/Getty Images

Like many small farmers, she has never had crop insurance. She grows a range of different produce, specialty beans and maize – and because of how most crop insurance works, she would have had to insure each of them separately. Insurance coverage for some varieties is virtually nonexistent. “You can’t insure lemongrass or bitter melon,” said Michael Yang, a small farms and specialty crop adviser for [University of California Cooperative Extension](#), who often advises Hmong producers in Fresno, California. It can be easier to insure 500 acres (202 hectares) of soya beans than 0.5 acres of arugula.

To address some of these issues, the US Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency in October changed its micro farm insurance program to make it easier for small producers who grow specialty crops to get insurance, and shored up a program that helps farmers insure all commodities under one policy. And there are federal disaster programs as well as state programs available to small, underserved producers – including a drought relief grant program created by California’s department of food and agriculture available to undocumented farmers.

But language barriers and actuarial complexities can deter even those who qualify for aid. “Even if your farm is under a foot of water, and your crops are all gone, you still have to prove on paper that that happened,” said Ruth Dahlquist-Willard, a small farms adviser with the University of California Cooperative Extension. “And that can take a lot of documentation and time.”

Many small farmers can’t afford to wait. For Antonio Palma, a producer in Ventura who supplies Mexican grocery stores across southern California, just the damages to his farm equipment

amounted to more than \$1.1m. He has been paying about \$7,000 a year to insure up to \$5m in damages – but so far, has failed to get any answer about how much his policy will pay out. “We are desperate because we don’t have any money right now. We have no way to start over,” he said. “Everything we have built for the past 15 years. It’s gone.”

Farmers ‘always adapt’

In the weeks since the storms, the strawberry stands across Fresno and Clovis have remained empty. Farmers markets in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles are missing longtime vendors. In a state that grows nearly half the country’s produce, almost a third of farms are under 10 acres (4 hectares), and another third are under 50 acres (20 hectares) – small, immigrant-run farms have a big impact on local and national foodways.

As global heating fuels fiercer wildfires, deeper droughts and more frequent floods in California, the state’s small farmers face an uncertain future.



A worker drives a piece of farm equipment at the Catalán Family Farm. Photograph: Maanvi Singh/The Guardian

“I’ve met farmers in California’s central coast who were hit hard by fires there three years ago, and then the drought and then again by the floods this year,” said Evan Wiig, director of communications at the non-profit Community Alliance with Family Farmers, which provides grants for small farmers and undocumented producers affected by natural disasters. Even those who didn’t experience any direct losses are out thousands of dollars after farmer’s markets shut

down due to inclement weather. Others were unable to transport their produce to stores and restaurants due to flooded highways and mudslides.

Somehow, at the Catalán Family Farm, under the bright, cyan skies, in the still, springtime heat – it almost looks like the storms never happened. The onion and kale seedlings are almost ready to go in the ground. The farm has lost its organic certification – because the flood waters could have carried in pesticides and other chemicals – although tests have verified that most of her farm is free of toxic runoff, and safe to replant.

Best of all, the chiles that Catalán had been drying in a shed had survived the deluge.

“And you know, in a way, us farmers are like the water,” she said. “Put us in a bottle, we take the shape of the bottle. Put us in a lake, we expand to take its shape. We’ll always adapt.”

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Arroyo Grande farmer discusses status of crops months after winter storms

By Karen Cruz-Orduña (News Channel 3 and 12)

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ARROYO GRANDE, CA An Arroyo Grande farmer weighs in on the status of crops and employment within the local farming industry. Tom Ikeda with Ikeda Brother Inc. said the company lost 30-40% of its crops. This means it is less revenue from a business perspective. He said the winter storms impacted their crops for months. “A lot of our early fields struggled with quality. we didn't get the production,” said Ikeda.

Despite the financial loss, things are getting better. “That being said, the consumer is benefiting because prices are down, supplies are up, and quality is up as well,” said Ikeda. “So generally, when the prices are down is when the quality of the product is the best because there's good supplies when the prices are up. Usually, the quality is a little bit more marginal because there's a shortage.”

But not so much for farmworkers at Ikeda Brothers and across the Central and South Coasts. Many are still trying to catch up with their bills. Erica Diaz Cervantes with the non-profit organization ‘CAUSE’ said many agriculture workers had expressed financial burdens, especially with their living situations. Some of their homes were damaged because of the storms. “There's been a lot of repairs that they've had to take out of their own pockets to be able to make sure that there's no mold,” said Diaz Cervantes. “And that anything that's been leaking through their homes has been fixed. “

Many farmworkers were out of a job or working part-time for months after the winter storms; now, many are working full-time as the strawberry season has begun. Diaz Cervantes says the non-profit is trying to help them during this time of need because families are still struggling to stay afloat.

“Local food banks as well, to be able to provide food for their families because has been supporting the efforts of doc fund which was able to provide a one-time relief check to many families,” Diaz Cervantes.

The non-profit is one of many stepping up for the farmworker community. Ikeda said he is trying to help them as much as possible because even though the company lost some revenue over the last few months, he prioritized his employees. “It's going to be tough for them to make up what they lost there,” said Ikeda. “There will be some opportunities to make it up because just to try to catch up, we had to work a little bit more on overtime. So they're able to make up some of their lost wages that way, but I don't think it will fully come back, possibly for the whole year.”