

Stockton Record – Business

**DROUGHT DISASTER DECLARED IN S.J., ELSEWHERE
DECISION MAKES LOW-INTEREST LOANS AVAILABLE**

By **Reed Fujii**

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Federal farm officials have declared nearly the entire state of California a drought disaster area, which gives farmers and ranchers hurt by the arid conditions access to low-interest emergency loans.

Val Dolcini, executive director of the U.S. Farm Service Agency in California, said Friday that it was the first time he'd seen a disaster declaration covering the state, except for San Francisco. Securing access to water for crops and livestock has been a top concern for producers of all types of crops and commodities throughout the state, he said from his office in Davis.

"We've been living off the snowpack from a couple of seasons ago," he said. "It has become a very serious issue and probably exacerbated some of the other issues we are seeing, such as the (wildland) fires.

Scott Hudson, San Joaquin County's agricultural commissioner, said he sought and received a formal disaster declaration for the county earlier this year. The primary impact has been on grazing lands and cattle.

Cattle and calves were pegged as the county's 10th most valuable commodity in 2012, with revenues estimated at \$67 million.

"We got very little rain after December of 2012," Hudson said Friday. "A lot of the cattlemen in this area depend on the feed produced by rangeland."

Without natural grasses thriving on winter rains, ranchers may have to buy additional feed for their herds and many cattle may weigh less, and thus fetch less money, when sent to market. Another concern, Hudson said, is that two consecutive seasons of below-average rain may limit the ability of pasturelands to recover.

"If our rangeland grasses aren't growing and production is lessened, than you lose your seed reservoir for the next year," he said.

Duane Martin Jr., a cattle rancher based in Elk Grove who moves his herds among pastures in the central portion of the Central Valley, from Madera to Willows, said conditions were tough this year but much better than in harder-hit areas in the south Valley and Central Coast.

"You get north of Fresno and the gains, the weight gains on our stocker cattle, were pretty good. We really have nothing to complain about," he said.

However, Martin said his biggest worry is the coming rainy season and lack of new water development by state and federal officials.

"If we don't get some healthy rains this fall, we're going to have some problems in this state," he said.

"Mother Nature better bail us out this winter, because our government isn't taking care of us." The latest expansion of federal emergency relief was announced Thursday.

Dolcini said it'll probably be next week before he can gauge the depth of need for such help, but his agency is already active in the hard-hit areas where emergencies were declared earlier. "We've been working with the livestock industry, who have been suffering from severe drought conditions on the Central Coast," he said.

In addition, he plans to visit the area affected by the Rim Fire, now scorching the Sierra north of and into Yosemite National Park.

"My anticipation is we'll be able to provide some measure of assistance to impacted livestock ranchers," he said.

More information about the loan program and drought-relief assistance is available from the FSA office in Stockton, 3422 W. Hammer Lane, Suite A, or by calling the office at (209) 472-7127.

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