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COST-SHARE PROGRAM TO HELP FARMERS RECOVERING FROM DROUGHT

RALEIGH — North Carolina farmers reeling from drought can obtain help under a program unveiled Tuesday in Raleigh. The program will cover 75 percent of the cost of restoring drought-damaged pastureland and providing additional water supply for livestock and crops.

The N.C. Agricultural Drought Recovery Program will be administered statewide through local Soil and Water Conservation district offices beginning May 1. It was made possible by a \$6 million grant from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission.

“This grant makes it possible for more than 1,000 farmers and farm operations to restore some of the damage from last summer’s severe drought and to prepare, so the next long, hot and dry summer doesn’t do as much damage,” said Billy Ray Hall, president of the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center.

The Rural Center worked with the General Assembly’s Joint Select Committee on Agriculture Drought Response, the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, several state agencies and other agricultural interests to design the program and arrange funding. The Division of Soil and Water Conservation, which will administer the program, is part of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Others participating in the program design were the N.C. Department of Agriculture, North Carolina Grange, N.C. Farm Bureau, N.C. State University Agricultural Extension Service, N.C. Foundation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, U.S. Department of Agriculture, N.C. Soil and Water Conservation Commission and Agricultural Advancement Consortium.

Rep. Ray Rapp, co-chairman of the legislative committee, said a bill seeking an additional \$6 million to extend the program to more farmers will be submitted to the General Assembly in May.

“We recognized that any proposal we made to the legislature could not go into effect before July at the earliest, too late to save many of our farmers,” Rapp said. “Fortunately, the friends of agriculture in North Carolina are not limited to members of the General Assembly. Money from the Tobacco Trust Fund lets us put this project into effect immediately.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture last year designated 85 of North Carolina’s 100 counties as natural disaster areas. As of April 8, 80 counties remained under drought conditions with the other 20 considered abnormally dry.

Farmers affected by the drought may apply to one of the state’s 96 Soil and Water Conservation district offices for help with several types of projects. These include pasture renovation, drilling and redrilling wells, pond construction and renovation, converting closed lagoons to fresh water ponds, and upgrading existing irrigation systems to more efficient models. The program is open to farmers with a total adjusted gross income of less than \$250,000 or those who derive 75 percent of their income from farming operations.

“North Carolina farmers lost a half billion dollars in crops last year because of this drought – that’s 17 percent of total crop revenue in a typical year,” said Sen. Charlie Albertson, also a committee co-chair. “The damage wasn’t merely in lost harvest. Pastureland needs to be renovated and reseeded before livestock can graze again, and we’re still in this drought. Farmers really need our help to go forward.”

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