

Recently I traveled to Western N.C. to check out damage from the flooding caused by Tropical Storm Fred. This was a very serious storm for many families. At press time, four people have died and five more are still missing, 23 roads are closed, homes have been washed away and many businesses have been impacted – including farms.

In surveying agricultural damage, we flew over several spots where entire fields were washed over with floodwaters and I saw a significant amount of crop and infrastructure damage.

Specifically, we saw damage to tomatoes, peppers, vegetables and nursery stock – all of these are major crops in the mountains. It is harvest time for tomatoes, peppers and vegetables and nurseries have years invested in plants to get them to a marketable size.

Some fields that were flooded will most likely be total losses, because crops that have been underwater cannot be harvested for public consumption. It will take some time before we get damage estimates, but there will be significant agricultural losses associated with this storm.

I was not able to tour everywhere, but we are aware of damage in Haywood, Transylvania, Buncombe, Jackson, Mitchell, Rutherford, Yancey, Madison and McDowell counties.

In a lot of ways, it reminded me of the flood damage in 2004 from back-to-back hurricanes Frances and Ivan that brought heavy rainfall within 10 days of each other to the region.

Frances dumped between 8 to 12 inches of rain; Ivan brought another 6 to 10 inches in about the exact same location.

I will tell you that it never gets any easier seeing the destruction of storms, floods or hurricanes, because you always know that the debris you see scattered around and uprooted represents people's lives and the payday for the hard work a farmer has put into a crop.

And in a short period of time, it can all be gone.

We have activated our Agricultural Emergency Hotline to assist farmers and we will have people manning the line daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. That toll-free number is 1-866-645-9403.

Farmers can also find recovery resources on the department's disaster Web page at www.ncagr.gov/disaster.

In the days following the storm, some of our Research Stations staff helped farmers round up cattle and put up temporary fencing. Our Plant Industry staff has been working with nurseries to help assess damage.

Speaker Tim Moore and Rep. Jimmy Dixon, along with some members of the Western delegation were able to join me to see some of the damage. It is important that they are able to see the level of devastation for themselves. It's hard to imagine otherwise.

In talking with farmers, many expressed hope that some disaster assistance could be offered to help them recover, similar to what we did through Operation Brighter Day in 2005.

I'll be working with the legislature and Gov. Roy Cooper on this.

In the meantime, I am grateful that the N.C. Farm Bureau has activated its N.C. Farm Bureau

Foundation's Disaster Relief Fund where people can make donations to help our Western neighbors. People can donate by texting the word "Farm" to 91999.

North Carolinians are always quick to help one another in times of crises, and that is especially true of the agriculture community. Farmers have been through situations like this before, but it doesn't make it any easier.

Please continue to keep Western North Carolina in your prayers.