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## Funding stalled after wildfires

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## Some farmers expect to shut down if aid doesn't come soon

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December 13, 2007

More than \$55 million in government loans or grants has been approved for, or already delivered to, San Diego County homeowners, business owners and members of local Indian tribes affected by the October wildfires.

Yet the amount of aid given to San Diego County farmers hurt by the fires remains at zero, and it may stay at that level for a while.

Most in the local farming community – a business sector arguably hit harder than any other by the fires – say they have all but given up on the prospect of meaningful help from the state or federal governments.

“The system is well-oiled for (nonfarm) businesses and homeowners,” said Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau. “But there is proving to be no such safety net for farmers.”

More than 8,600 acres of county farmland were destroyed by fires during the week of Oct. 21, and officials estimate the cost to the local agricultural industry at \$42.5 million.

More than 1,700 acres of avocado groves were damaged or destroyed in the Witch Creek, Rice Canyon and Poomacha fires. Growers of cut flowers and ornamental trees also suffered significant losses.

Some farmers say they will have to shut down unless government help arrives soon.

“If I can't get crops planted within the next couple months, I may have to call it quits by July,” said Gary Collins, owner of Suncoast Botanicals. The cut flower operation in the San Pasqual Valley was devastated by the Witch Creek fire.

A week after the fire, Collins applied for a loan program guaranteed by the state of California. He is still awaiting approval.

As of this week, the U.S. Small Business Administration had approved \$45 million in



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune  
Bob Schaar, a Fallbrook avocado grower, lost 27 of his 30 acres in the Rice Canyon fire. His Rancho Los Lobos sustained more than \$1 million in losses. “It’s just like Katrina but on a smaller scale,” he said.



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