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GOV. RIDGE REQUESTS FEDERAL DROUGHT DISASTER DECLARATION FOR ALL 67 PENNSYLVANIA COUNTIES

Gov. Ridge seeks federal aid on behalf of Pennsylvania farm-families

ST. LOUIS (Aug. 9) – On behalf of all Pennsylvania farm families, Gov. Tom Ridge today asked the federal government to declare all 67 counties a drought disaster area, opening the door for farmers to begin to recoup the devastating losses they have suffered as a result of the drought.

“Agriculture is the number one industry in Pennsylvania,” Gov. Ridge wrote in his request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). “It is not only essential to our economy, but to our heritage. We must provide immediate assistance to our 50,000 farm families.”

Gov. Ridge made his request at the National Governor’s Association meeting in St. Louis in anticipation of data that is currently being collected across Pennsylvania to document the severe-drought devastation farmers are experiencing. This information will be presented to a USDA board Thursday that will determine if a disaster declaration is warranted. However, preliminary estimates show that farmers across the Commonwealth have lost most of this year’s crop.

“Preliminary findings in Northampton County show that farmers there are experiencing at least 70 percent losses in corn and hay production,” Gov. Ridge wrote. “Despite severe storms almost two weeks ago in Western Pennsylvania that deposited 3.5 inches of rain, preliminary figures show Somerset County is recording 40 percent losses.”

Four Pennsylvania counties, Beaver, Fayette, Greene and Washington, became eligible for federal disaster assistance after the USDA declared a disaster for the entire state of West Virginia as a disaster area on Aug. 2. These farmers are now eligible for assistance through low-interest loans for crop damage and losses from the drought.

“Low-interest loans will provide some relief to farmers, but will still leave them with more debts to repay” Gov. Ridge said. “Real relief will only come if, when Congress returns, our farmers are given grants, too. I will be advocating for Congress to do just that.” To be eligible for federal disaster assistance, farmers must have lost at least 30 percent of a single crop; be able to repay the loan and other loans; be unable to receive credit from another source and have an adequate credit history. Farmers would have eight months from the date of loss to apply for loans.

Other forms of assistance available are:

- Emergency Conservation Program, offering emergency funding on a cost- share basis for farmers to implement water conservation measures;
- federal crop insurance; and
- Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program, providing compensation for crops not eligible for insurance.

Gov. Ridge declared a drought emergency for 55 counties on July 20. This declaration imposes mandatory restrictions on non-essential water use. Those restrictions do not apply to agricultural irrigation for the production of food, fiber and livestock maintenance.

For more information, visit the Drought Emergency website through the Pennsylvania homepage at www.state.pa.us, or directly at www.dep.state.pa.us (choose Drought Emergency.)

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