Colorado Floods Could Bring Recharged Soil

Ivan Moreno & Manuel Valdes, AP

Surging waters in Colorado swept away barns, silos and fences and left houses covered in mud. The flood waters were so powerful they uprooted irrigation pipes and spread them around the fields, leaving lakes next to which cattle now graze. They also brought instant relief to drought-hardened areas, with the promise of moisture restored in deep soils and the possibility of reservoirs refilling to help farmers well into next year. "There is a silver lining if we look down the road," said Ron Carleton, the deputy commissioner of agriculture for the state. "We just have to get past these near-term impacts."

The damage to Colorado's multibillion agriculture industry — the state's third-largest at $8.5 billion last year — is vast: Aerial footage shows broad swaths of inundated farmland. Rows of crops up and down the South Platte River were submerged, including corn, lettuce, onions and soybeans. "We've seen these rivers come up before. We've never seen it like this," said Ron Kline Jr., whose family runs Kline Farms in the region. Carleton, who has been touring the flooded areas, said officials won't have a full picture of the damage until water recedes. However, they've begun to identify potential trouble spots. The corn harvest had just begun, and there could be losses there, as well as in produce farms in Weld County, Carleton said.

"Just from driving around you see land underwater. That tells you a lot right there. It's land that's certainly not producing right now," he said. On Kline's farm, the waters pushed a shed and the equipment inside down a road. A semi-truck and trailer was turned 90 degrees. A 700-gallon tank of engine oil is nowhere to be found. "It's somewhere between here and Nebraska," said Kline, who farms corn, wheat and alfalfa.

Troy Seaworth, whose family owns Seaworth Farms in Wellington, on the northern edge of the flooding, is one of the farmers who will be looking to see how much water was captured in reservoirs. It will take time for that to become evident. "If we capture this year for next year, that's a good thing — that's a great thing," he said. Seaworth, who plants sugar beets, wheat, and corn, said his farm was for the most part spared. But the storms have forced him to delay corn silage harvest and the cutting of alfalfa. Still, he's not expecting major economic losses. Delaying harvest of crops could mean reduced quality in some cases because they'll be past maturity, said Keith Maxey, the director of Weld County's extension office for Colorado State University.

Maxey said damaged roads will also have a big effect for farmers and ranchers. With transportation routes impaired, it's going to take them longer to move their products, adding fuel and labor costs. "Rather than just a five-minute trip, it's going to be 30 minutes," he said. Weld County commissioners agree, and say they're already looking at how to get temporary roads pending permanent fixes. Local

government officials say it's too early to get an assessment of how much the damage will cost. While some counties have not yet estimated how much land was damaged, Weld County has said they believe the number to be more than 2,300 parcels of agricultural land. "I don't think we're going to know for a while how much damage is out there," said Weld County Commissioner Mike Freeman.

Officials are also assessing the extent of damage to irrigation ditches on which some crops depend. With hay and alfalfa underwater, it's also likely that feed prices will increase because of limited availability. Most of the livestock in the area is safe on higher ground, said Carleton, the deputy agriculture commissioner. The Colorado Cattlemen's Association, which represents about 13,000 beef producers in the state, has been communicating with members to find out what help they need. Beef is one of the largest contributors to Colorado's agriculture industry. "At this time, CCA will continue ongoing assessments to determine if some level of relief assistance is desired from our members upon evaluating infrastructure, livestock, and feed impacts," the organization said in a statement.

For now, all of the possible long-term benefits mean little for the farmers who've seen their work immersed underwater. "Large areas of the state will see some agricultural benefits from this storm system," said Nolan Doesken, Colorado's climatologist. "Then comes the flood corridors. The flood corridors — wow."

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