

German farmers call for help as drought depletes summer harvest

The unrelenting heatwave is fraying nerves throughout Germany, but for the nation's farmers, the situation is genuinely grave. With scarcely any rain having fallen since April, crop yields have been drastically depleted.

The unstinting dry spell and heatwave currently bringing 30-degree-plus temperatures (86 Fahrenheit) to Germany has had severe consequences for farmers in the country's north.

With minimal levels of rain having fallen since April, the normally fertile regions of the north and northeast have seen their grain and crop harvests severely affected, with massive losses now guaranteed as a result of the drought.

The German Farmers Association (DBV) has called upon the government at both federal and state level to provide financial assistance to the tune of €1 billion (\$1.17 billion) to compensate farmers whose crops have been most severely affected.

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"We expect billions in losses," DBV president Joachim Rukwied said last week. "The government needs to declare a state of emergency so that farmers in areas hit hardest by the drought can be helped directly with cash aid," Rukwied said.

Once a state of emergency is officially declared, the legal basis for providing state assistance to farmers would be created.

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On Tuesday, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture will meet with representatives of the various German states to discuss the crisis brought about by the drought and the actions that need to be taken.

Breaking point

"It hasn't really rained since April and that's the main growth period for our

grains and the other crops, we've never seen anything like it," said Juliane Stein of Agro Boerdegruen, a farming conglomerate based in the eastern region of Saxony-Anhalt.

"We've reached the point here in Germany where we're talking about a natural disaster that's a threat to our livelihood."

A drought counts as a natural disaster in Germany once 30 percent of the annual harvest has been destroyed. Given the damage already done, that criteria appears close to being met.

The grain crop alone has fallen by eight million tonnes, which equates to 18 percent of the annual yield. That has knocked a whopping €1.4 billion from industry revenues so far this year, according to estimates.

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Sugar beets, rapeseed, potato and corn crops are among the produce most severely affected by the lack of growth. "The cornstalks are knee-high" and are sprouting smaller cobs or none at all, said Stein, whose enterprise is located about 150 kilometers (90 miles) west of Berlin.

Helping those most in need

The DBV says the aim of any forthcoming state aid would be to help farms whose harvests have been reduced by more than 30 percent of the average of recent years.

As well as that, the organization wants a tax-free "risk reserve" mechanism to help farmers during times of crisis. It is "imperative that Germany has stable rural areas with stable businesses," said Rukwied.



The drought has had a profound impact on the German agriculture sector

On Sunday, German Minister of Food and Agriculture Julia Klöckner said she was “very concerned about the effects of the drought shown among many farmers in the north and east.” She said that if necessary, the federal government will step in to assist, once the full harvest report is submitted at the end of August.

Waiting for a rainy day

This year, southern German regions such as Bavaria have experienced roughly normal levels of rainfall, whereas places in the north and east have been afflicted by a high-pressure system — more commonly associated with regions such as the south of France and Italy — which shows no sign of abating.

Aside from the damage to crops, the knock-on effects of the drought have also been felt. With farmers deprived of food sources for animals, prices have soared. As well as that, dairy farmers have sold large numbers of cattle, with the number of slaughtered cows and heifers surging by 10 percent in early July.

With little rain forecast for the next 10 days, the pain looks set to continue.

aos/sri (AFP, dpa)

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