

# After the Deluge

## Farm disaster and recovery

BY CISSY BOWMAN

**T**he summer of 2008 brought floods to the Midwest, the likes of which have never been seen in recorded history. Unending record rainfalls washed out roads, turned farm fields into lakes and put people out of their homes.

In Indiana, on June 7, the Columbus regional hospital's entire basement was completely flooded, and six to eight inches of water rose into the first floor, prompting an emergency evacuation. Government buildings in Franklin, Indiana, were under six feet of water.

Areas of Wisconsin were hit with their second "100 year flood" in less than 12 months. Large areas of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, West Virginia and Wisconsin were soon declared disaster areas. The rains fell for days, with severe storms and tornadoes, causing even more damage. Weeks later, many families remain unable to go back to their homes, farmers cannot get into their fields, and those who have gone home sometimes have found their homes, land, and crops damaged beyond repair.

As the floodwaters rose, it became apparent to state and local authorities that action needed to be taken immediately. Emergency meetings were held, hard-hit areas identified, and plans for assistance drawn up. Hurricane Katrina had taught us a lesson on being prepared for disaster, and I saw government agencies working hard to provide assistance and information. I also talked to organizations and to folks who had contact with farmers in those areas and to other organic certifiers. We watched flood-battered communities come together and help one another as we networked our expertise and support capabilities. Aid information was put together rapidly.

It is still too soon to evaluate the total extent of the damage to crops and farmland. Much of the farmers' ability to recover losses will be based on their ability to get back into fields and replant in a timely manner. Getting the word out to them about applying for assistance has been a priority. Agencies in affected states immediately began to visit the worst-hit counties, put together disaster assistance information, request extensions for deadlines for reporting damages, and offer outreach into the communities.

Official damage assessments are forthcoming, but preliminary assessments indicate that most areas in flood plains are affected not only

with major crop loss but also sizable damage to the land itself. For example, many farmers are reporting sediment build-up with sand and silt; washouts; debris; levy, dike or other protective waterway barriers destroyed or damaged by flooding. Many of the affected fields cannot be replanted until the damage is mitigated.

Immediate concerns included disposal of animal carcasses and of containers of chemicals that washed away in the floodwaters and contaminated water. This is where flood damage affects retailers who buy food from farmers whose crops were flooded. Floodwaters that flow through adjoining farm land, parking lots, industrial sites and households pick up contaminants such as pesticides, oil, fuels, paint, etc. These contaminants are then deposited on downstream fields by the floodwaters. Floodwaters may also contain manure from livestock operations or sewage from septic tanks and treatment ponds that could pose a pathogen-contamination risk.

### Food sold for human consumption

Floodwaters can carry all kinds of contaminants, and with ongoing outbreaks of e. Coli and salmonella in the U.S., food safety is on everyone's mind. According to the FDA, no plant where the

edible portion was subject to floodwater can be sold for human consumption. The FDA definition of "flooded" is: "The flowing or overflowing of a field with water outside a grower's control that is reasonably likely to contain microorganisms of significant public health concern and is reasonably likely to cause adulteration of edible portions of fresh produce in that field."

Any crop that has come into contact with floodwater is considered "adulterated" by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and cannot be sold for human consumption. This applies to organic and conventional food crops as well as crops with edible portions beneath the soil.

Many crops that were grown in flooded areas have been rejected by buyers. Retailers should be aware of the location of production and potential contamination; caution must be exercised.

### Disaster assistance for businesses

Farms are not the only businesses hurt. Retail stores were also harmed by the floodwaters. The U.S. Small Business Administration offers long-term, low-interest loans to repair or replace damaged property for businesses, including farms in a declared disaster area. For more information, call 1-800-659-2955. For

### Cooperative Grocers Nationwide Raising Funds for Farm Flood Victims

On July 21, the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) announced that participating members nationwide are raising funds for co-ops and co-op suppliers affected by the historic floods that devastated portions of the Midwest over the past several weeks.

NCGA is collaborating with the Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund (NCDF). Through its 501(c)(3) foundation, NCDF is making its Cooperative Disaster Relief Fund available to collect and disburse donations.

"Once again, natural food co-ops and members are showing their compassion and appreciation for producers hurt by the recent floods," said Bill Patrie, NCDF interim executive director.

Shoppers at participating co-ops will be able to donate in four ways:

- 1 Cash and spare change.** Donate cash and spare change at the register or service desk.
- 2 Check.** Drop off checks made payable to Northcountry Co-op Disaster Relief Fund at participating co-op's customer service desk.
- 3 Mail.** Mail checks to the fund at: Northcountry Co-op Disaster Relief Fund, 219 Main St. S.E., Suite 500, Minneapolis, MN 55414.
- 4 Online.** Contribute to the fund online using PayPal. Simply go to [www.ncdf.coop](http://www.ncdf.coop) and click on "Donate" and follow the instructions.

Co-ops and co-op farmer-suppliers who wish to apply for disaster relief will find an application and funding guidelines on the NCDF website at [www.ncdf.coop](http://www.ncdf.coop). NCDF will issue tax-deductible receipts for donations in excess of \$250.

businesses that have suffered losses, the SBA offers:

- **Physical disaster loans:** Businesses of all sizes may apply for a loan of up to \$1.5 million to repair or replace damaged real estate, equipment, inventory and fixtures. These loans cover both insured and uninsured losses. Interest will not exceed 4 percent.
- **Economic injury disaster loans:** Small businesses and small agricultural cooperatives suffering substantial economic injury may be eligible for these loans up to \$1.5 million to meet necessary financial obligations—expenses the business would have paid if the disaster had not occurred. Interest will not exceed 4 percent.
- **Downloadable applications:** Businesses may apply directly to the SBA at [www.sba.gov/services/disasterassistance/index.html](http://www.sba.gov/services/disasterassistance/index.html).

While the floods were disheartening, we have seen the resilience of the human spirit and the coming together of communities—from individuals, organizations and government agencies. Within a short time, Farm Aid raised over \$50,000 for direct assistance to family farmers who needed emergency food, clothing, utilities and medicine. Farm Aid grant funds were supplied to Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Missouri.

Thanks to Farm Aid and Operations U.S.A. for coming forward with direct assistance for family farms, to the Indiana State Dept. of Agriculture, and to the individuals who gave time, money and emotional support when so much was lost and hope was running down as fast as the rains.

#### Organic certification

Organic operations that were affected by the floods need to contact their certification agency and ask what information is needed in order to maintain their organic certification. ■

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