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TOP STORY

Tester, Bullock tour Gallatin County hail-damaged farms

JODI HAUSEN, Chronicle Staff Writer Aug 8, 2013



Though they knew the crop damage from last week's hailstorm was bad, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester and Montana Gov. Steve Bullock were clearly struck Wednesday after touring miles of Gallatin County farmland.

"It's made me sick to my stomach," Tester said after seeing field upon field of corn and barley damaged on the ground on John Schutter's Manhattan farm.

Bullock called the tour “eye-opening and sickening.”

Six huge grain bins stood at the edge of one of Schutter’s cornfields. Most were dented, and one was nearly crushed in half. Mangled wheel lines littered the edge of dirt roads.

“And this so close to harvest,” Tester said, as he fingered a corn tassel he’d picked up from the ground.

Ears were just beginning to grow on the decapitated stalks, one farmer told the senator and governor. The stalks now stand about knee-high.

“What do we do with this now?” Bullock asked.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” replied farmer Rob Brownell.

“This is like fodder,” said Matt Flikkema, vice president of the Montana Grain Growers Association. “Useless fodder.”

Some farmers are trying to salvage the year, replanting peas or planting rye for pasture. But for most, it’s a 40- to 80-percent loss, depending on the crop, said Billy Denison, county executive director for the Farm Service Agency.

Denison and others were gathering statistics Monday for Gallatin County commissioners so they can write a letter to Bullock asking him to declare the county’s agricultural land a disaster. Such a declaration could trigger federally subsidized loans for affected farmers.

Gallatin County Commissioner Joe Skinner met the other officials at Gallatin Grown in Amsterdam, an 8-acre organic vegetable farm that was also damaged. He said commissioners plan to have the letter sent to Bullock by the beginning of next week.

After seeing all the destruction, Bullock said it’s clear the declaration is warranted.

“Just looking at this, there really shouldn’t be a question,” he said.

And when Tester asked Gallatin Grown farmer Conni Mahoney what could be salvaged, she remained upbeat, saying the stressed plants that weren’t destroyed are producing fruit early.

“That’s a cup-half-full kind of attitude,” Bullock said.

“You kind of have to,” Mahoney said.

Tester, a farmer from Big Sandy, said he didn’t know which was worse — drought, where you watch your crops die slowly day after day, or a hailstorm like this.

“It’s both bad,” he said. “It kind of shows you who’s boss in this business.”

Tester reminded those on the tour that “money’s tough in D.C.,” but, he added, “We will work with the governor’s office to do what we can to help.”

As for the farmers, “Tomorrow’s another day,” Schutter said.

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Tester and Bullock tour damaged farmland

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