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Farmers fear severe damage to crops

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By ALLEN ESSEX/Valley Morning Star

MONTE ALTO — Sorghum growers have been working long hours to harvest what would have been a bumper crop, farmers and agriculture experts said Tuesday.

But any sorghum not harvested quickly is likely to be ruined by Alex, which is expected to be a hurricane when it hits the South Texas/Northern Mexico coast as early as tonight.

"Not even 20 percent of the crop has been harvested," said Dale Murden, past president of the Grain Sorghum Producers' board and general manager of Rio Farms.

"A few of us started (harvesting) last week," Murden said. "At most, some guys may have 20 to 25 percent of their crop cut."

"The grain crops will probably be laid over by the rain and the excessive winds," he said. "It would not be able to be harvested. (Sorghum growers) had just started harvesting full blown last Friday."

Farmers with corn crops will also be facing heavy damage from the storm, Murden said.

Other crops are also vulnerable to the approaching storm.

Anastacio Cavazos, county extension director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Willacy County, said farmers can expect to lose any sorghum crop that isn't harvested before the storm arrives.

Cotton may also be ruined, but it won't be ready for harvesting until August, he said.

"This is the best cotton crop in 15 or 20 years," Cavazos said.

Farmers will end up plowing under this year's sorghum crop when the fields dry up, Cavazos said.

"This is just going to be a devastating storm to the cotton and grain growers in Willacy County," he said. "We have the best crop in maybe the last 15, 20 years."

Even if the eye of the storm goes into Mexico, heavy rain is predicted for the Rio Grande Valley because it will be on the north side of the storm's circulation, he said.

"I mean it's just bad news for us all the way around," Cavazos said. "Whether it comes in south of us, or right on us, the amount of rain will be extremely, extremely detrimental to this crop. It could just wipe it out, completely."

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Sorghum also won't tolerate standing water and the crop needs to be harvested now, so it can't wait until fields dry out after heavy rains, he said.

Steve Bearden, of Rio Grande Valley Sugar Growers Inc., said a tropical storm or hurricane will not help an already bad situation.

"We've had a horrible year because of two freezes and all the rains we got during the growing season, so it's been a horrible year for sugar," he said. "Right now, rain alone would be beneficial for the cane crop.

"A lot of wind, that does concern us because of the potential shredding of the leaves and breaking off of the larger stalks. Rain alone ... if we don't get a big wind storm, we'll be OK."

John McClung, president of Texas Produce Association, said the severity of the storm will determine how much damage farmers suffer.

"It all of course depends on how much rain we get and how much wind we get," he said. "Most of the fruit and vegetable crops are finished. There is still some onions being harvested, but very little. The probability at this point is that wind is not going to be the issue. It's going to be rain. If we get the huge volumes of rain — 5 to 10 inches — that are projected, then that is going to cause some disruption. We are primarily a winter producer and most of those crops have been harvested and the land is fallow now."

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