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GOV. RIDGE ANNOUNCES \$5.3 MILLION IN INTERIM DROUGHT ASSISTANCE FOR PENNSYLVANIA'S FARMERS

Gov. Ridge continues to call on Congress to send grants to help PA farmers recover from drought

HARRISBURG (Sept. 10) – Gov. Tom Ridge today announced a \$5.3 million interim plan to help Pennsylvania's farmers recover from the drought.

“Help is on the way for Pennsylvania's farmers,” Gov. Ridge said. “We'll reimburse our farmers to help buy the hay they need to recover from the devastating drought. If they have to go far to get that hay, we'll help them pay to bring it home. We'll transport in donated hay from the Midwest. And we'll eliminate the fees that many farmers have to pay the state. These interim steps will give our farmers a helping hand while we await help from Washington.

"Pennsylvanians have sent millions of their hard-earned federal tax dollars to fund disaster grants for states across the nation. Now, unfortunately, we need that same help for our farmers. I urge all Pennsylvanians to join me in calling on Congress to do the right thing for Pennsylvania's farmers." Gov. Ridge today signed a letter with 11 other Northeastern governors, urging Congress to enact grants for drought-stricken farmers.

“We will begin to implement this interim assistance while we await congressional action,” Gov. Ridge said. “When Congress acts, we will reassess to determine if additional state assistance is necessary.”

Gov. Ridge's interim plan:

- creates a rebate plan to reimburse Pennsylvania farmers for hay purchases and long-distance hay transportation costs;
- transports donated hay from the Midwest to Pennsylvania; and
- waives state fees on Pennsylvania farmers, such as testing fees at the state's agricultural labs.

Gov. Ridge also amended his July 20 drought emergency declaration to ensure that all 67 Pennsylvania counties can benefit from the interim assistance package. A rebate plan will be created to partially reimburse farmers for their costs in purchasing hay and, if necessary, hauling it from out of state during the fall and winter seasons.

A \$60 rebate would be provided for each ton of hay purchased in state. A \$50 rebate would be provided for each ton of hay purchased out of state. A \$25 rebate for each ton of hay would be provided to help defray long-distance hauling costs.

This rebate plan would contribute to the purchase of approximately 60,000 tons of purchased hay.

The state Department of Agriculture has secured 1,300 tons of hay donated by Wisconsin to help Pennsylvania farmers. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will pay to transport this donated hay from Wisconsin to Pennsylvania. The donated hay will be stored at Fort Indiantown Gap, Lebanon County, for distribution to drought-stricken farmers.

The departments of Agriculture and Labor and Industry will waive nearly \$300,000 in user fees farmers pay. These include veterinary laboratory diagnostic, pesticide license, seed certification fees and seasonal farm labor camp registration fees. Fees for testing forages and feeds will continue to be provided free of charge.

Hay purchase and transportation were top priorities from Pennsylvania's farmers identified by all three major Pennsylvania farm organizations, and the Governor expressed his appreciation to the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the Pennsylvania State Grange and the Pennsylvania Farmer's Union for working with the Department of Agriculture to suggest ways to help Pennsylvania farmers. Gov. Ridge called for federal grants for Pennsylvania farmers on Aug. 18, in a letter to congressional leaders and Pennsylvania's congressional delegation asking for federal grants to help Pennsylvania farmers. He noted that agriculture is Pennsylvania's No. 1 industry with nearly 50,000 family farms and \$44 billion generated each year.

"The emergency allocation by Gov. Ridge is good news," state Agriculture Secretary Samuel Hayes said. "While there is no easy response or 'silver-bullet' solution for the drought and its long-lasting effects, it will be possible to provide a good measure of hay and transportation assistance for our dairy and livestock industry later this fall and winter."

Guidelines for the hay assistance program will be available on Oct. 1. Details also will be available on the department's website off the Pennsylvania homepage at www.state.pa.us or directly at www.pda.state.pa.us.

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