



FACING THE STORM

Hurricane Michael struck the heart of rural Georgia in early October. The storm's track took a staggering toll on agriculture, which is a \$73.3 billion industry in Georgia, making it the No. 1 contributor to the state's economy. Damage estimates as of Oct. 25 exceed \$2 billion. Cotton loss is \$550 million; vegetables, \$480 million; pecans, \$560 million; poultry, \$25 million; peanuts, \$20 million; timber, \$763 million; and the landscape and green industry, \$13 million.

CASEY COX, LONGLEAF RIDGE

Sixth-generation farmer Casey Cox, 27, grows sweet corn, peanuts, pecans and timber on her farm, Longleaf Ridge, in Camilla, Georgia. She was among a group of Southwest Georgia farmers selected to speak with President Trump about Hurricane Michael Oct. 15 in Macon, Georgia.



“There is a pull. There's such a sense of heritage and belonging for me, it's hard to describe.”

“We have been knocked down, but we will not give up. We have our faith. We have each other. We will get through this. Stay strong, farmers. We are in this together.”

“These trees were planted in 1910 by my great-grandfather Cader Cox. These pecans are just such a generational loss.”

“This is the part that's really sickening, these pecans everywhere on the ground. These were almost ready to harvest and now they're just all over the place.”

“For a lot of the farmers, they have insurance on the crop, but not on the trees themselves.”

MOSS FAMILY FARMS

The Moss and Jimmerson families of Camilla, Georgia, have losses that extend from cotton to wine grapes. Renee, 41, and her husband, Clayton, 38, are pictured below in one of their damaged cotton fields. Preston Jimmerson manages a branch of Moss Family Farms in Doerun, Georgia.



“Renee: “This is such a deep emotional loss that we all feel like someone has died.”

Preston: “If Southwest Georgia fails, agriculture in Georgia fails.”

Preston: “I've been grieving this crop since the day it happened. Now I'm finally attempting to get to a place where I can put this behind me and move forward. It took a mission of outreach for me to start to get to a point to come around.”

Preston: “As a farmer, I spend more time on the farm than in my home with my family. To attempt to recover from this, I'll spend 13,14-hour days every day for the next 30 days just to start to get a hold on everything.”

Clayton: “This was so widespread and came at the worst time for anyone in ag.”



GERALD LONG, LONG FARMS



Gerald Long is the 12th president of the Georgia Farm Bureau. Long is a diversified farmer from Decatur County, Georgia. He raises cattle and grows peanuts, vegetables, corn, cotton, hay, small grains and timber with his family on their farm near Bainbridge. Long was among the Southwest Georgia farmers selected to meet with President Trump on Oct. 15 in Macon, Georgia.

“None of us figured that we would have this kind of total devastation or anticipated the severity of it. We’ve got to work through it.”

“As president of Georgia Farm Bureau, I want to encourage our people, the farmers, to be patient. We’re at one of our lowest moments in life, and patience is tough right now.”

“We’ve got a good many retired farmers, or getting ready to retire, that maybe had 50, 75 or 100 acres of timber out there. That was their 401K. That was their retirement, and it’s not there now. It’s gone.”

“It’s going to be very difficult, not just for young farmers, to be able to service their debt. We have realized that some older farmers, who have been farming all their life, they’re not going to be able to service their debts because of the devastation that they had.”

STATE REPRESENTATIVE CLAY PIRKLE, TURNER COUNTY

Clay Pirkle is a fourth-generation cotton farmer in Sycamore, Georgia. He earned his undergraduate degree in economics at Georgia Tech, and his MBA from the University of Georgia. He worked as an economist for the federal government and as a commercial lender in his hometown before returning to the family farm to work with his father. He was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 2015, representing all of Ben Hill, Irwin and Turner counties and portions of Tift and Coffee counties.



“This was going to be the best cotton crop ever. Ever. I’ve never seen a cotton crop this good. I’ve only been farming about 25 years. My Dad has been farming 50. He’s never seen anything like this, in terms of the devastation or the potential crop that we had.”

“I don’t know if it’s even worth running a picker through this field because it’s not more than 150 lbs per acre -- less cotton that it will take me, cost-wise, to run over it. The bad thing is, I’ve spent all the money I’m going to spend on the cotton crop. I paid money to plant it. I paid money to fertilize it. I paid money to water it. I paid the land payment. I paid to spray it. I paid to get the weeds out. All of my inputs were done. I’ve got probably six hundred or seven hundred dollars in it outside of the picking. I could sell this cotton for \$1200 an acre (before the storm) and now it’s not worth running a picker through. If you had 500 acres, that’s \$600,000. I don’t have \$600,000, so I don’t know where the difference comes from.”

“I enjoy farming, not because of the lifestyle it affords me, not the luxury, because there’s not a lot of money in it, but when my kids were coming along I went to all their games -- tennis and activities at school -- and they could work on the farm. Free-range. They learned the value of hard work, what it means to get up early and work late. I remember picking my kids up from school and I would take them by the farm and we would pull pigweed before they got a chance to do their homework or study after school. We’d pull into the field and we would start to work, so it was a lot of time I could spend with my kids.”

“There’s something inside of me. I don’t know if it’s inside of all farmers, but there’s something inside of me that derives intense satisfaction from being a good steward of the land. There is something about planting a crop, forging through the things that nature is trying to throw at the crop to keep you from making it, and then sitting on a picker to harvest the crop. There’s just something innate about that that I derive a lot of satisfaction from.”





STATE REPRESENTATIVE CLAY PIRKLE, TURNER COUNTY (cont.)

“I would like to see disaster assistance that is not tied to crop insurance. I know the government cannot make me whole and they can't make up for the 1500 lbs or the \$1200 an acre that I had put all the inputs in for and was ready to reap the returns. They can't make me whole and I'm not asking to be made whole, but if I could get in a time machine and go back to May and not plant this cotton, if I could just get my input costs back. If we could get some help in just starting over. The ability of farmers to meet the needs of America and the world through our farming practices is a national security concern.”



“The very first call I made Thursday morning was to my banker. He didn't have electricity, I didn't have electricity, but I had his cell number so I used my cell phone and I said, 'I want you to know it's as bad as it gets. I went from a bumper crop to no crop overnight and there is no way I am going to be able to pay you back for my seed and fertilizer and chemicals, much less any term debt that I have, and I want somebody to feel almost as bad as I do this morning.'”

“I rode around the block to look at my farm and when I got back and I saw the devastation I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach and my legs were physically weak. I felt like I had the flu from the shock and the depression. I just dropped to my knees in the living room and I cried like a baby because I, like many of these other guys, don't know that we're going to be able to do this next year.”



“I don't know how we're ever going to come back from this, but farming is all I know how to do. All I've ever done. It's under my fingernails. It's in my veins.”

-Stuart Griffin

TOMMY DOLLAR, DOLLAR FAMILY FARMS

Thomas H. "Tommy" Dollar II serves as CEO of Dollar Farm Products Co. and President of Dollar Family Farm in Bainbridge, Georgia. Dollar is the third-generation owner of his family business, Dollar Farm Products, which has been in business since 1939. The Dollar family raises cattle and grows cotton, peanuts, corn and soybeans. Dollar was selected to meet President Trump in Macon on Oct. 15, and also hosted Vice President Mike Pence for a post-storm farm tour.



“We've lost 14 out of 26 irrigation pivots personally. The latest count I got yesterday talking to four or five different people and making sure they were not counted twice, I believe there are 523 pivots down in Decatur, Seminole, Miller and lower Early county.”

“We are in the peanut business here at Dollar Farm Products and we lost all the peanut infrastructure here to elevate peanuts to get them off of semis and into warehouses, so we're going to have to redo all of that. I just got a bid a minute ago and it's going to take us six to eight weeks to get that running, but peanuts won't last in the field another three weeks. So we are working diligently.”

STUART GRIFFIN, GRIFFIN FARM

Stuart Griffin is a farmer in Bainbridge, Georgia. He raises cattle on his operation, which includes approximately 2000 head. Griffin Farm also grows peanuts and corn.



“Devastating would be the main word I would use, but I'd also say we are fortunate and blessed. Even though it's hard to look at it that way.”

“I'm humbled by the people that are reaching out to us. It's unbelievable. People that don't even know me. A guy from Mississippi just called and said, 'I'm coming with a load of hay.' I don't know him, never heard of him. I said, 'I can't pay you', and he said, 'I don't want you to pay me. We had a disaster a couple of years ago and Georgia came calling. I want to pay it back.'”

“It's humbling how many people are reaching out. I just tell most of them that we need time. We just need time.”

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"We're pretty much on the honor system with our neighbors. We've got his cows. He's got our cows. We're just trying to keep them off the highway."

-Stuart Griffin

BLAKE AND WHITNEY BLEDSOE, LIMESTONE PLANTATION

Blake and Whitney Bledsoe and their four sons grow cotton, wheat, peanuts, corn and soybeans in Hawkinsville, Georgia. Blake and his father, Danny, planted 1300 acres of cotton this year, and lost at least 50 percent of the crop to Hurricane Michael. Whitney was selected to meet President Donald Trump in Macon Oct. 15.



“ Whitney on meeting President and First Lady Trump: "It was so wonderful. He was just so approachable and relatable and he listened. By the time he got to me he'd already heard it was a bumper crop and the crop insurance wasn't going to cover it and we needed it to recover from years past, so he was prepared for what I was going to say, but he asked about what crops we had lost and if the crop insurance was going to pay and I was able to tell him that no, it wasn't going to pay, and he said, 'Don't worry. We'll take care of you.' So I'm going to trust him at his word and hope he's going to do what he said."

Whitney: "I had emailed Commissioner Black right after the storm just because we had never seen that amount of damage. Before we left the house we acknowledged that it could be worse, we could have had a family member that died. Whatever we saw we just were trying to remember, it could be worse. After we saw it I said, 'Blake, we're just going to have to start emailing our congressman or whoever will listen because if they don't know, they won't know how to help us.'"

Blake on the anticipated crop: "The rain was timely, the heat was at the right time and it was the perfect year, set up for a perfect storm, I guess."

Blake: "We won't be anywhere close to normal. Typically we shoot for a 1250-1300 lb average. That's what we fertilize for, that's what we do inputs for. We were picking 1575, 1580, almost 2000 lb. (per acre) cotton in some fields prior to the storm. We got through picking some of the complete fields that were not harvested prior to the storm yesterday and I was telling Whitney they averaged 705. That's basically, we're saying, a 50 percent loss."

Blake: "It would almost be easier had it been a drought because you've got an opportunity to start cutting inputs and get ready. **It caught us with 100 percent of our inputs in. The only thing we had left to do was pick it.**"

Blake: **"A lot of older farmers were getting ready to (retire). And they were hoping, 'Well, if I have one more good crop I'm going to hand it down to the next generation and not have to pass the debt down.' Now a lot of that is gone. A lot of the big plans for some of the farmers are gone."**

WILLARD AND GREG MIMS, MIMS FARMS



Greg Mims raises cattle and grows corn, cotton, peanuts and soybeans on his family farm in Donalsonville, Georgia. Chairman of the Georgia Soybean Commission, Greg was selected to meet with President Trump Oct. 15 in Macon. Willard Mims, Greg's father, also still actively farms.

Greg: "I haven't seen all of the property yet. Right now it's just not that important. I mean it's important, but we need to get this crop out first. We need to salvage what we can."

Greg: "Cotton is pretty much devastated. Some fields about 100 percent blown out. Everything is just ramshackled. I lost a couple of sheds. I don't know where a lot of stuff is at."

Willard: "I don't believe I've ever seen anything like this before. Hurricane Kate did destroy a lot of the cotton crop in '85 but a lot of it had been picked. This year very little had been picked and I think the rest has basically been destroyed."

Willard: "It's going to take us years to get back and rebuild. We've got no telling how many trees we've got to move. You see all the buildings that need to be repaired and some to be completely replaced. We are trying to get through, but we run mighty lean in terms of labor force."

Greg: "This will be felt for many years to come and it's going to take some financial assistance. This is serious."

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BILL BRIM, LEWIS TAYLOR FARMS

Bill Brim is CEO of Lewis Taylor Farms, a family-owned and operated vegetable and greenhouse operation founded in the 1930s in Tifton, Georgia. Purchased by Brim and Ed Walker from their families in 1985, the farm now grows more than 6500 acres of produce annually with 81 greenhouses providing just under 900,000 sq. ft. of growing space. The business employs 700 people. Brim was selected to meet with President Donald Trump in Macon Oct. 15 to discuss storm damages.



“This storm has really just kicked us in the stomach. We’ve lost all of our pepper crop. We’ve lost about 75 percent of our squash, and probably about 80 percent of our cucumbers.”

“I had the University of Georgia out here Monday (after the storm) and we went through all our figures and I told them I felt like I had at least seven-and-a-half million just in my costs, putting the plastic down, the drip, everything. They figured what the valuation would be at the sale price (produce) was bringing that day, and what our normal yields are. We lost \$31,750,000. We’re really in a mess.”

“We’ve got tomatoes that are hurt. We’ve got eggplant that’s probably done. Next week we may breakout in disease from the hurricane and not be able to gather anything. We’re trying to pick some pepper but it’s sun-scalded so bad we’re having to throw it on the ground. We’re trying to pick what’s not sun-scalded and get it in a box, and then we worry about stem decay in it. If we ship it from here and it goes up north and they get stem decay, they’re going to reject it and I’m going to have a freight bill, too. **There are lots of things that people don’t think about that we incur here, even on a good market.**”



SHEILA RICE, CALHOUN PRODUCE

Sheila Rice’s family farm in Ashburn, Georgia, has evolved from a row-crop operation to a fully diversified agribusiness since her parents founded it in 1982. From the spring strawberry u-pick fields to the fall corn maze, the farm is a year-round draw. Hurricane Michael flattened the corn maze, laying 10-foot stalks on the ground. With 300 elementary school children due for a field trip the Monday morning after the storm, Rice purchased 180 bales of hay and built a hay maze. Power was restored to the farm at 9:20 the morning of the field trip. Kids started arriving at 9:30.



“There is no crop insurance for agritourism. You take the loss.”

“The storm flattened my corn maze. It’s bad. It was so pretty. The goal in here is to find the 12 signs. You pull it up on your GPS and it’s a question. You answer yes or no and you know which way to go.”



“My motto has been adapt and overcome through this whole thing.”

“The maze has drawn 500 people in the past. My goal was 600 people this year.”



“We know that the Lord is here. We know that He provides the crop and we know that He is going to take care of us. Somewhere in here is a lesson for us to learn and we’re just having to trust in that. Obviously we’re hoping in the federal government but we’re resting in Him, that He’s going to take care of us and provide. We’re not without hope because we have Him.” -Whitney Bledsoe



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KEVIN RENTZ, RENTZ FAMILY FARMS

Fourth-generation farmer Kevin Rentz, 35, farms land in both Decatur County, Georgia, and Jackson County, Florida. In addition to raising cattle and growing 3500 acres of cotton, 3600 acres of peanuts and 500 acres of soybeans, Rentz also operates a farm supply and peanut buying point in Brinson, Georgia.

“This couldn't have happened at a worse time. I think if it would have been three weeks down the road, we still would've had the timber losses and stuff like that, but we would've had a lot of this crop in from harvest.”

“I asked my insurance agent, ‘What are we going to get if they zero us out?’ Which we have nothing, so they should zero us out. He said that on just one of my farms he guarantees that we will get about \$400,000 and that was covering like 800 acres. That won't even cover the growing cost. That's half the growing cost.”

“My granddad originally built all this infrastructure. We don't have a lot of newer stuff and that's the problem I'm seeing. My insurance is not going to cover what it will cost to replace this now. We never expected this kind of total devastation.”

“We have roughly, according to my early estimates of infrastructure damage including my center pivots, over \$3 million of damage. Just infrastructure, not including my crop loss. I'm thinking it will be above \$3 million on my crop loss personally with cotton, soybeans and peanuts that are left in the field.”

“We did pick 100 acres before the storm. Best cotton crop we've ever had. We, of course, haven't ginned this, but we've got a yield monitor on the cotton picker and it was around 1700 lbs. (per acre). It doesn't get much better than that. It's heartbreaking.”

“You know, to be honest with you, we've had storms come through here and they downgrade as soon as they hit land. Not that big of a deal, but this was way worse than what anyone expected. Last year when Irma came through, I got more prepared for it than this. It may have played a little role in me not being as prepared because we just got a little bit of rain from Irma and that was it.”

“This cotton was defoliated and ready to pick, and as you can see, it's been picked by the storm.” ”



“If you take agriculture out of Seminole County, you might as well roll up the sidewalks.”

-Willard Mims



“Unfortunately, our worst thoughts were realized with Hurricane Michael,” said Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Gary W. Black. “We saw months and sometimes years of work just laid over on the ground in a matter of seconds. These are generational losses that are unprecedented and it will take unprecedented ideas and actions to help our farm families and rural communities recover.” Full resolution photos for print and digital media can be found at agr.georgia.gov/gda-hurricane-response-media.aspx. Please use these photos, quotes and other resources to help tell the story of farmers impacted by this catastrophic storm.