

# Drought puts farm disaster label on counties

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U.S. Agricultural Secretary Thomas Vilsack has designated all four Hawaii counties as farm disaster areas after economic losses because of the statewide drought.

The emergency declaration enables growers and ranchers to apply for up to \$300,000 in loans through the Farm Service Agency.

Agricultural officials are continuing to offer to ranchers a Livestock Indemnity Program for their losses.

From January through June, many areas of the state had below-normal rainfall, including South Point on the Big Island, which had 9 percent of its normal rainfall, according to the National Weather Service.

Several ranchers and farmers conservatively estimate losses in the hundreds of thousands of dollars because of the lack of rainfall and loss of pasture lands.

Kahua Ranch President Monte Richards said he has been through droughts, but none in the past 50 years compares with the one he is experiencing now.

"I think this is probably the worst," said Richards, the ranch's board chairman. "It's been dry so long. ... This one has stretched on and on a few years."

Richard's son, Tim, said the ranch manages 15,000 acres in Kau and Kohala, and both areas have been hard hit by the drought.

He said the drought has forced the ranch to move

cattle to off-island markets sooner, reducing production of adults and cutting the herd of mother cows to about 3,300-3,400 from 4,000 head because of the shortage of food.

He said the ranch had two-thirds of the normal rainfall in 2009 and about half of normal rainfall so far this year.

"Even if it rained today, we're probably not going to have forage for a month, probably two to three months," he said. "It's going to take years to rebuild the herds."

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