

Crops ruined by hurricane

By Candy Hatcher
Staff Writer

ASH — It hadn't been six weeks since a 73-day drought crippled Brunswick County's corn and tobacco crops. Farmers were prepared to lose half of what they planted. Then Diana struck.

With winds that lifted trees from their roots, the hurricane flattened soybean plants, rotted tobacco leaves and killed corn crops.

Pecan trees were destroyed, and sweet potatoes rotted in soil that soaked up 20 inches of rain last week. Agriculture damage in Brunswick County was estimated at \$5.3 million.

For some farmers, work has been non-stop since the hurricane hit. Rooftops needed replacing and salvageable tobacco had to be dried. But for other farmers, those with late tobacco and corn crops, there was little to be saved.

"The corn is gone," said Talmage King, a farmer from this western Brunswick County community. "It's flat on the ground and ain't no way to get it up." Much of it had made it through the summer drought, he said, "but this came along and finished it up."

King was optimistic about his chances of saving some of the tobacco and soybeans. "We're going to try and get what we can," he said. "We may survive."

Farmers with insurance will be able to collect for some of the crops they lost, but most agreed that federal crop insurance will not go far toward the losses they have suffered.

Farmer Gregg Babson of Ash had structural damage at four of his seven tobacco barns, but he said he will be able to save most of his tobacco. He was one of the lucky ones. His

Please see CROPS, 7A



Staff photo by Willie Howard

When high winds hit this Brunswick County corn field, the only thing left standing was a solitary corn stalk. County farmers lost nearly all their corn crop. Many tobacco and soybean crops also were ruined.

Crops

Continued from 1A

tobacco was harvested when the storm hit. Although Diana played havoc with the barn roofs and wet the tobacco inside, Babson and his mother, Alice Long, were able to dry the leaves before they rotted.

"I didn't fare as bad as a lot of 'em did," he said. "But this year's put me in the hole, bad." The problems began with the drought during ten weeks of the growing season, he said. Then disease destroyed part of his crops, "and a hurricane on top of that. Farming's had it."

His mother, who has farmed in Brunswick County since 1950, said it has been "the worst year we've ever had. We are hurting something bad," she said. "1984 is a year to be remembered."

Marlon and Joey Long, brothers who farm tobacco in Ash, agreed that it had been a hard year on farmers. "What tobacco was left in the field, it took," Joey said. "It's a living. That's about all. It's a hard living."

Pearly Vereen, who has tobacco, soybean and corn crops that were severely damaged in the storm, said Brunswick County's timber had

also taken a beating. But the corn is "just a total disaster," he said. "It was right at the point of harvest. I'd just gotten my machines ready to go when it hit."

Vereen, who is chairman of the Brunswick County Commissioners, said the county averaged 75 to 80 bushels of corn per acre last year. "There probably won't be five bushels this time," he said.

He also estimated that 60 percent of the tobacco crop in the county had been destroyed. The wind bruised the tobacco in the fields, turning the leaves black, Vereen said. Some of those who had harvested their tobacco were able to save it by drying the leaves. But Vereen said his crop was ruined because he had no electricity to dry what had been put up.

Soybean crops are usually four feet high in mid-September, Vereen said. The plants are mature, but are not ready for harvest until November. After Diana crossed paths with the soybeans, the plants lay along the ground, piled about a foot high. Last year, he said, the county averaged 26 bushels of beans per acre. "We'll be lucky to get eight bushels an acre this year," he said.

"Everybody thinks Hazel was worse," Vereen said. "But Hazel came later and crops were harvested. About the only things Hazel hurt were buildings and soybean

crops."

Farmers will be spending their days reroofing buildings and cutting timber, Vereen said, taking the timber to sawmills and using the lumber to repair buildings.

If Brunswick County is declared a disaster area, low interest loans will help farmers pay their bills.

"A farmer has a lot of faith and an honest-looking face," he said. "But a year like this, it's going to take the people of this county 10 years to make up for it."

State officials Tuesday estimated damage to five counties from Hurricane Diana at almost \$79 million, most of that at private homes.

In a letter from Jesse Pugh, state coordinating officer for emergency management to the federal relief officials, the latest preliminary damage estimates were put at \$78,847,623.

Private residential damage was \$30,113,678. Agricultural damage totaled \$26,454,400 and damage to state and local government property was \$17,179,160. Damage to business totaled \$5,100,385.

The totals were for damage in New Hanover, Brunswick, Columbus, Pender, Bladen and Sampson counties, the letter said.

Also, an industry trade group estimates insurance companies will have to pay \$36 million in claims resulting from the hurricane.

This report includes material from the Associated Press.