

Governor views farm storm losses

By Leslie Gruber
Regional Editor

WILLIAMS TOWNSHIP — The governor's tour of the storm disaster area provided Williams Township Union School students with a once-in-their-young-lifetimes thrill Wednesday.

The helicopter in which he arrived to launch his farm disaster tour excited the students as much as or more than the presence of high-ranking officials. The helicopter landed on the spacious playground of the school on U.S. 701 about 10 miles south of Whiteville.

While Gov. Jim Hunt and Commissioner of Agriculture Jim Graham inspected crop damage under the guidance of Columbus County Extension Service Chairman Garland McCullen, the 712 students of the kindergarten through 12th grade school toured the helicopter and questioned its crew.

Hurricane Diana, which brought the officials here, cost farmers of Columbus, Bladen and Brunswick counties nearly \$20 million in potential income loss this year, ac-

cording to preliminary estimates released Sept. 14. Officials now expect crop losses to be greater.

"I think we have a real agricultural disaster, and a lot of people don't realize its extent," Hunt said after his tour of the New Hope, Beavertown, Harrelsonville and Brunswick areas of central and southern Columbus County.

Graham said, "The corn is really knocked down. They're not getting over 30 or 40 percent of the corn. We'll try to help. There's little state money available. There's some federal aid."

Later, in Brunswick County, Hunt told County Commissioner Pearly Vereen, who raises corn, tobacco and soybeans, "This (federal) disaster program ain't worth a damn for a farmer." Putting his arm around Vereen, Hunt said, "Just call us now. If we can push some things along, let us know."

After the officials' tour Wednesday morning, Frank Williams of the Harrelsonville community southeast of Whiteville continued trying to salvage some of the crop from his devastated corn field. Not one stalk

stood unbroken. Many corn ears lay on the ground.

The combine, despite special settings, fittings and slow travel, left as many ears as it picked. His situation typifies that of thousands of acres of corn in the area.

Gayle Smith of Whiteville, combine operator, estimated he was picking up about 40 to 50 percent of the corn in the field.

"On that field across the road we got 110 bushels per acre before the storm," he said. Williams said the same variety was planted in the two fields.

Based on the pre-storm yield and the estimated yield on corn now being harvested, many farmers stand to lose 60 to 70 bushels an acre. At an average of \$3 a bushel, that means a loss of \$180 to \$210 an acre on late harvested corn alone.

Sharply contrasting with the depressing desolation of the gray-brown corn fields was the excited chatter and bright-colored clothing of the Williams Township school students as they went through the helicopter. The orderly class section groups fired hundreds of questions

at the crew.

"Was the helicopter in Vietnam?" "Does it have guns and things?" The answer to both was "no."

"What keeps it up in the air?" was a favorite question.

Asked if they enjoyed the tour, the students answered with a resounding "yes."

Retha Sturdivant, assistant principal, observed, "This is a great experience for the children. It's the first time most of them have been in or near a helicopter and it's the first time many have been near a top state official."

Lisa King of the school's year-book staff said, "It's the first time since I can remember that we had a governor stop here." The Aggie '85 staffers plan to use the event as the feature of their publication.

Hunt and Graham made their final stop Wednesday afternoon at the disaster assistance center at the National Guard Armory in Wilmington.

Staff writers Candy Hatcher and Mary Wilson contributed to this report.