

AFTER HURRICANE FRAN



Staff photo / DANA ALLWEIN

A building at David Chestnut's farm on N.C. 11 in Duplin County shows damage from the storm's passing. Farmers were just recovering from Hurricane Bertha when Fran showed up.

Little left to save on farms after Hurricane Fran hits

By **DANA ALLWEIN**

Staff Writer

KENANSVILLE — Sitting on his recliner inside his modest rural home, Thomas Chestnut gazes out his window at the whipping his family farm took from Hurricane Fran.

His view: crumpled pieces of tin roof scattered on fields of dead corn, a demolished tobacco greenhouse, shards of glass from barn windows and flattened silos.

"It's not really anything now," said Mr. Chestnut's grandson David as he walked around the farm on N.C. 11 near Kenansville. With his hands in his jeans pockets, David shook his head and rubbed his eyes, still in a daze five days after the hurricane.

The scene is the same throughout rural Southeastern North Carolina. The crops farmers tried to resurrect after Hurricane Bertha struck July 12, Fran took out, cutting the economic lifeline of many rural residents.

But Fran didn't stop at damaging crops. She flattened whatever else was in her ferocious path — barns, equipment, storage bins, silos and other farm necessities.

In Onslow County alone, officials estimate \$31.6 million in damage to buildings, machinery, equipment and land. The county lost \$2.9 million in corn, cotton and soybeans compared with the \$21.6 million it lost from Bertha, mostly in tobacco.

Milton Gillette, a 72-year-old farmer near Swansboro, lost his 450-acre corn crop and much of his tobacco in the two hurricanes.

"You take two women on your hands at one time and something bad's gonna happen," Mr. Gillette said.

Fran alone damaged many of the structures on Mr. Gillette's farm. His tobacco packing house was leveled, and his tractor shelter collapsed, damaging three tractors.

"I was born here on this farm," he said. "It's the worst in my lifetime."

Duplin County doesn't have a damage estimate for farm structures but it lost 100 percent of its remaining tobacco, 75 percent of its remaining cucumbers, squash, cabbage and collards and 65 percent of its remaining corn.

Duplin farmers also lost 300,000 turkeys and chickens but no hog waste lagoon spills were reported.

Brunswick County suffered less damage than counties north of it. Farmers lost 80 percent of their tobacco to both hurricanes and 75 percent of their corn.

Fran took a big bite out of the county's cotton crop, which is estimated to have suffered 35 percent more losses after Bertha's original 30 percent hit. Farm structures in the county were spared, said Brunswick agriculture extension

agent Phil Ricks.

"Those to the north of us are in dire straits compared to us," he said.

Columbus County has preliminary damage estimates, including a 100 percent loss of tobacco between the two hurricanes and 60 to 70 percent loss of corn.

Mr. Chestnut, 82, has never

seen the Duplin County farm he inherited from his father so devastated, even after Hurricane Hazel blew through in 1954, a tornado took out their four hog farms in April and Bertha wiped out their crops just three months later.

"It gets old after a while," said Mr. Chestnut's son Tommy.

"We had enough," David said.