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

KENANSVILLE — Sitting in his recliner in his modest rural home, Thomas Chestnut, 63, gazed out his window at the wreckage his family farm took from Hurricane Fran.

His view: crumpled pieces of his roof scattered across fields, a demolished tobacco greenhouse, shards of glass from barn windows and fallen wooden slats.

"It's not really anything new," said Mr. Chestnut's grandson, David, as he walked around the farm near Kenansville. With his hands in his pants pockets, David shook his head and rubbed his eyes, still in a state of shock after the hurricane.

The area is the same throughout rural southeastern North Carolina. The crops haven't even been harvested, and the economic lifetime of many rural communities.

But Fran didn't stop at damaging crops. It flattened whatever else was in its path — barns, equipment, storage barns, and other structures.

In Onslow County, officials estimate $11.8 million in damage to buildings, machinery, equipment and land. The county lost 94 million in crops, cotton louvers and hay, compared to the $11.6 million lost from Bertha, mostly in tobacco.

Siblings Gillette, a 72-year-old farmer, and Swan, 73, lost their 400-acre cotton crop and much of their tobacco in the two hurricanes.

"You take two women on your hands at one time and planting has happened," Mr. Gillette said.

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

"I was here not as far as 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 cotton, soybeans, cotton and hay, and 50 percent of its remaining corn.

Duplin farmers also lost 300,000 turkeys and chickens lost to fog and high winds. Brunswick County suffered less damage than counties north of it. Farmers lost 100 percent of their tobacco to both hurricanes and 75 percent of their corn.

Fires took a big bite out of the county's cotton crop, which is estimated to have suffered 60 percent more losses after Bertha's original 30 percent hit. Farm structures in the county were spared, said Brunswick agricultural extension agent Phil Eirin.

"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. 70 to 75 percent loss of corn.

Mr. Chestnut, 63, has never seen the Duplin County farm for harvesting from his father to devastation. Even after Hurricane Hazel blew through in 1954, a tornado took the 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.