



Remains of a bridge across a creek on Lane Holton's farm near Camilla, GA.

As surely as the floodwaters of July 1994 left an indelible mark on the Georgia landscape, they will also forever be etched in the minds of many state residents. For those who live in the 52 Georgia counties that were declared federal disaster areas, the loss of life and property will long affect their lives.

After damages were assessed, the flood had earned the dubious distinction of having been the worst natural disaster in the history of the state. The losses were so large, they equaled or exceeded those experienced by individual states during the 1993 flooding in the Midwest along the Mississippi and Missouri River basins. Both flash flooding and runoff caused the deaths of 31 people in the 1994 flooding in Georgia. More than 2,000 residents lost their homes; an additional 7,000 homes were damaged; numerous businesses were de-

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Surviving the flood of 94 means starting over for many Georgia beef producers. Volunteers and contributions have helped, but it takes individual will power to rebuild farms.

BY JANET MAYER

stroyed; and damage to state roads, bridges and facilities totaled \$200 million. Especially hard hit was the agricultural industry, with flooding of more than 450,000 acres of cropland, resulting in losses estimated at \$100 million.

Part of the farm losses were sustained by Lane and Melodie Holton. The Holtons own a commercial cattle breeding operation and feedlot in the southern part of the state near Camilla.

"It's a strange feeling to look out over what once was an irrigated field of corn about a week away from harvest and not see a single tassel of corn, or, for that matter, even the center pivot irrigation system," Lane says with understandable emotion. "On one day we had outstanding fields of corn and milo; the next day they resembled a lake. Three days later there was just a smelly mess remaining. Really, unless you were here seeing it,

you can't comprehend the amount of water and what went on."

The Holtons, as well as many other farmers in the area, are still encountering problems from the devastation. The Holtons derive their main income from cattle and peanuts on three Flint River area farms comprised of 4,600 acres. Their farming operation includes cotton, silage, corn, sorghum, milo, and about 750 acres of Bermudagrass pasture. During the flooding in July, about 80 percent of the Holton's 1,600-acre farm was under 5 to 20 feet of water.

"We have experienced firsthand the feeling of despair that comes with just standing and watching the floodwaters rising near our home and covering our crops," Melodie says.

"Although the water never got into our home, as it did in many others, we know the feeling of loss when the floodwater receded, and we saw the rotting crops and the silt and sand left in our fields."

The farm, which has been in the Holton Family for three generations, is no stranger to flooding, since much of the acreage is along two large creeks that fork on the farm and run into the Flint River beyond the property lines. Lane, who is 44 years old, has managed the operation since his return from college in 1973. But he has never seen devastation of the '94 flood's magnitude and still finds it hard to comprehend that 20 to 25 inches of rain fell in the state in a 24-hour period.

The **actual flash flooding** was caused when runoff from rainfall 40 to 50 miles north of Camilla poured into the Flint and the Ocmulgee Rivers, causing them to crest at 20 to 25 feet above flood stage. The outcome was severe flooding downstream on the Holton



Flooded pastureland on the Holton Farm will have to re-seed and fenced.

farm and in other areas where the rains had not been as heavy.

"Luckily, when the flood occurred, it was at the time of year when we had only 1,000 head of cattle in place; so none were lost," Lane says. "It happened that the cattle we had were in pastures that were on higher ground, so we went in on horses and pushed them onto the higher points. If it had been later in the year, when we had about 3,500 head here, we would have been in a real mess. The sorry part is, we lost crops planted to feed them."

The loss of the 160 acres of corn silage, which represented about 7,000 to 9,000 tons, will have a serious effect on the Holton operation, since they background about 5,000 to 7,000 steers each year. Lane predicts the loss of the crops will force him to curtail the number of steers to about one half of the usual number.

These losses will filter down from the Holtons to other breeders, since only part of that number of feeder calves

are bred at the farm. The remainder are purchased from other breeding operations.

As president of the Georgia Cattlemen's Association (GCA), Lane can sympathize with other farmers who were affected by the flood. "Since the flood, I have encouraged flood-affected members of our association to direct most of their energies toward the rebuilding process," he says. "I feel we should all try to remember the importance of a positive attitude."

He admits, however, that having a positive attitude has been difficult over the months since the flood. Frequent rains of 2 to 6 inches throughout the summer and fall have hampered the enormous cleanup. And as if to add insult to injury, half way through the harvesting of their peanut crop, the rain started to fall, keeping the harvest crew out of the fields for several weeks. This delay resulted in substantial losses to the crop.

Pasture damage from sand and silt wasn't as bad as the Holtons had originally antici-

pated. And although a lot of debris had hung up on their fences, fence damage wasn't as bad as they had feared. Still, he predicts the operation is facing many problems.

"Short term, this will disrupt the cash flow significantly," Lane says. "I suppose we will have to make some long-term loans to cover our expenses, because we are not eligible for any disaster assistance. From what I understand, the federal government is making the same type of direct-payment assistance available to our state as was available to those people in the Midwest who were flooded last year. But they say we are too large an operation to qualify. Our entire income comes from agriculture, so it is going to be quite difficult for us. I don't see how the federal government can put limits on a disaster no matter what the size of the operation is."

Rules set down by federal farm programs, state that agricultural operations that have early gross receipts of

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more than \$2.5 million do not qualify for any disaster assistance programs.

"That is why producers in badly affected areas, in a lot of cases, did not qualify for any form of assistance," says Glenn Smith, GCA executive vice president. "I think this is one of the fallacies of our farm legislation. When the farm bill was written in 1990, some urban legislator put this in as a last-minute thing, and it was inserted even though nobody else was really in favor of it. It has hurt a lot of people."

Smith knows of one young farmer downstream from the Holtons, near Bainbridge, who got hit just as bad.

"This young man had just gone out on his own and bought 1,500 acres of cropland, which the flood wiped out and sanded in. He is not eligible for any disaster programs; at 30

years of age, he will have to start over again. But really, this young man, the Holtons and some others are the exception, not the rule."

For the other GCA members, the flooding has affected their operations in many ways. Livestock producers hardest hit were in Monroe, Upson, Talbot, Crawford, Taylor, Macon and Sumter Counties, where flash flooding necessitated producers moving cattle to higher ground. Fortunately, because of quick action, few cattle were lost in rising waters.

Statewide, cattle losses numbered about 50 head. Smith attributes the small number to fast action by producers and also to the fact that animals, in a flooding situation, have the natural instinct to seek higher ground if it is accessible.

In the Ocmulgee and Flint River basins, the water rose slowly, leaving thousands of acres of pasture underwater and many miles of fencing

washed out. After the water receded, Smith says many of the pastures resembled sandy white beaches instead of the rich bottomland pasture it had been.

"Removing the tons of sand and silt washed in is going to be an insurmountable job," Smith says. "Some areas have anywhere from 6 inches to 3 feet of sand and silt deposits. Then, of course, when all of the pastures are cleaned up, they will have to be reseeded. Add to this the fact that a lot of hay and silage crops were destroyed, I know a number of cattlemen who will be looking for feed options this winter."

Smith predicts affected producers such as Holton will be cutting back on numbers of feeder cattle purchased. This will spiral on down through the Georgia cattle industry, which numbers about 25,000 produc-

The industry is the state's third largest cash crop, producing revenue of about \$3 million from the annual sale of about 1.5 million head of cattle.

"When a buyer leaves his

seat vacant at a feeder calf sale, it impacts the whole industry by affecting the producers he ordinarily buys from."

Smith says there is an irony in the whole scope of things. Although the flooding caused a tremendous loss for many farmers in the state, the rains were actually a mixed blessing. For farmers who were not in the flood areas, the extra rain will allow a record crop of soybeans, corn, cotton and hay in 1994. For the cattle producers who were affected by the flood, Smith and GCA have tried to keep members informed of available assistance.

"I know that no amount of aid can replace the losses from the flood of '94" he says. "But these funds, along with the thousands of volunteers and the millions of dollars contributed, will begin the rebuilding process. For those producers who don't qualify for aid, most are struggling to put it back together on their own."

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