

Snow slams ginseng farms

By Robert Imrie • Wausau Daily Herald •
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Gov. Doyle on Wednesday requested a federal disaster declaration for ginseng growers in Marathon County after a spring snowstorm collapsed the shade covers that protect the crop from the sun.

"We do have a crisis here," said Athens ginseng grower Ron Krautkramer, who was busy working in the field and trying to save his crops Wednesday. "There is a lot of snow damage. A lot of frost damage. I am not 100 percent certain how bad it is. I know that mine has been hit pretty hard."

Wisconsin has about 200 ginseng growers, with about 1,400 acres in production, producing 95 of the nation's ginseng, most of it grown in Marathon County, according to the Ginseng Board of Wisconsin.

Wild ginseng grows on the forest floor, shaded by trees. When cultivated on farms, the crops are shaded by artificial canopies strung above the plants.

A disaster declaration would provide farmers with low-interest loans and secure crop insurance payments, Doyle said.

In seeking the disaster declaration from U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Doyle said the storm accompanying freezing temperatures could have killed much of the crop.

"The plants that survived the initial damage could die in the coming weeks from excessive light exposure," he said.

Paul Hsu, owner of Hsu's Ginseng Enterprises, said shades on more than 200 acres of his crop east of Wausau collapsed from at least 4 inches of heavy, wet snow.

"It is a mess. It is a big, big mess. It is a disaster for the century for the ginseng industry," he said. "I have been in this business 36 years and have never seen anything like this."

It could cost \$200,000 just to restore the damaged shade structures, said Sharon Hsu, his wife.

She was unsure how much of the crop was killed, but the downed shades can suffocate the plants, and simply pulling off the shades exposes the crop to the sun, which will dry it out, she said.

Crews of up to 75 workers were helping get the shade back up, Sharon Hsu said.

Even if the shades get restored in time, no more than 75 percent of the crop can be salvaged, she estimated.

In 2007, the most recent year for which figures are available, the state's ginseng farmers harvested 400,000 pounds of ginseng, worth \$10 million, Doyle said.