

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Governor Leads Drought Tour of SW Kansas

Topeka – Kansas Governor Sam Brownback traveled to southwest Kansas today to lead a tour of drought-impacted areas. Kansas Agriculture Secretary Dale Rodman and Kansas Water Office Director Tracy Streeter joined the Governor on the tour that included Finney, Haskell, Gray and Meade Counties.

Drought indicators show precipitation in southwestern and western Kansas has been significantly below normal for the year, which also has considerably increased the risk of fire in those counties.

"Farmers and ranchers in dozens of Kansas counties are experiencing production losses caused by drought, wildfires and high winds. That's beginning to impact companies they do business with. It is important for us to see the impact first hand and talk to those directly affected," Gov. Brownback said. "We want to have a clear understanding of what's happening and how the state can assist these communities in the coming months."

The Governor said he expects an answer in about 10 days to his request the U.S. Department of Agriculture issue a drought disaster declaration for 21 Kansas counties. In April, the Governor issued a drought warning declaration for 20 counties and put 27 surrounding counties under a drought watch.

Wednesday's drought tour began with a stop at the farm of Dick Strandmark located in Haskell and Finney counties. Strandmark told the Governor his farm received less than seven inches of rain in 2010 and expects a total loss on the family's winter wheat crops.

"The drought is dramatically affecting the livelihood of many Kansans and in particular, our state's farmers and ranchers," Kansas Secretary of Agriculture Dale Rodman said. "Visiting the area is important to put in perspective the devastating effect the drought continues to have on the everyday lives of Kansas families."

The group then met with about 40 community leaders, business leaders, firefighters and emergency responders in Sublette. They talked about the impact of a wildfire last month that burned approximately 9,600 acres and damaged public infrastructure in Stevens and Haskell counties.

Several stressed the loss of the local shortline railroad, which dramatically increases operating costs for local grain elevators and other related businesses. Cimarron Valley Railroad lost six railroad bridges that will cost \$4 to \$8 million to rebuild. As a result of the loss of the shortline railroad, trucks now must do all of the hauling, which requires significantly more trucks and more fuel, as well as increased wear-and-tear on area highways. Brownback said that state government will work with local communities and affected businesses to rebuild the bridges.

The fire is just one of many that have recently taken place and have spread quickly because of the dryness and high winds.

"Visiting the area has been extremely important to get a first-hand look at the effects the drought has had on our winter wheat crop as well as the true extent of the Haskell County wildfire," said Tracy Streeter, Director of the Kansas Water Office and Governor's Drought Response Team Chair. "Should the drought conditions persist as the forecasters predict, we are equally concerned with the additional stress it places on the Ogallala Aquifer from an economic and hydrologic standpoint."

An aerial tour of Haskell, Gray and Meade counties gave the group a different perspective of the drought's reach.

"On the ground you see the drought's effects, but up in the air you get a real sense of how vast it is," Brownback said.

The group concluded the drought tour by meeting with area farmers and business owners in Meade County to listen to their concerns. They talked about the changes they're making in the crops they plant and the increased prices they're paying for hay.

"This tour gave us a great assessment of what Kansans are facing in the southwestern and western part of our state. I am very appreciative of everyone who took time today to visit with," Brownback said.

Before the drought tour, the Governor helped open the 3i Show in Garden City. Organized and managed by the Western Kansas Manufacturers Association, this three-day event salutes industry, implements and irrigation. Kansas Commerce Secretary Pat George, Kansas Highway Patrol Col. Ernie Garcia and Kansas Housing Resources Corporation Executive Director Dennis Mesa joined the Governor for a tour of the show.

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The 21 counties included in the Governor's request to the USDA are: Finney, Gove, Grant, Greeley, Hamilton, Haskell, Kearny, Lane, Logan, Meade, Morton, Ness, Scott, Seward, Sheridan, Sherman, Stanton, Stevens, Thomas, Wallace and Wichita

The 20 counties included in the Governor's Drought Warning Declaration* are: Finney, Grant, Gray, Greeley, Gove, Hamilton, Haskell, Kearny, Lane, Logan, Meade, Morton, Ness, Scott, Seward, Stanton, Stevens, Trego, Wallace, and Wichita

The 27 counties included in the Governor's Drought Watch Declaration* are: Barton, Cheyenne, Clark, Cloud, Decatur, Ellis, Ellsworth, Ford, Graham, Hodgeman, Jewel, Lincoln, Mitchell, Norton, Osborne, Ottawa, Pawnee, Phillips, Rawlins, Republic, Rooks, Rush, Russell, Sherman, Sheridan, Smith, and Thomas

**The Governor's drought orders authorize and direct all agencies under his jurisdiction to implement the appropriate watch or warning level-drought response actions assigned in the Operations Plan of the Governor's Drought Response Team.*