

HARSH SEASON

Weather, deer, tariffs challenge county farmers

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SPRINGFIELD — "This is the worst spring I have had in 57 years of my life, by far."

Paul Shinn, of Toyland Farms in Springfield, said as a farmer, he's used to dealing with his share of challenges from rain to hot weather to nature's pests, but this year has been exceptionally difficult.

"We've had wet ones, we've had dry ones, but this was a combination of both," he said. "Farmers are known to be complainers — it's too wet, it's too dry, it's too wet, it's too dry, and we do (complain) but we make our livelihood off of (the land)."

Shinn isn't alone in feeling the effects this summer from the spring. Dramatic shifts in weather, animals taking their crops and some commodity prices dropping impacted farmers across Burlington County — some just for the short-term, others for the whole season.

Cold, wet spring

The first month of spring featured three nor'easters in March, which made it the wettest month since 2011, according to climate reports from the Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. That snowy, wet weather continued into April, making it the "chilliest since 1982."

"It was the persistent chill that captured the most attention, with the green up of lawns and foliage,



Paul Shinn, owner of Toyland Farms in Springfield, walks through fields of soybean crops damaged by weather and deer. [NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

accompanied by the blossoming of spring flowers, delayed from normal by upwards of two weeks," a report from David Robinson, New Jersey State Climatologist read.

While May featured a warm-up temperature-wise, it also featured tons of rain — making it the 13th wettest May on record, according to the report.

For Paul Hlubik, of North Hanover, who farms on multiple properties across the county, that meant double work.

"We started out with a wet April and early May we got a

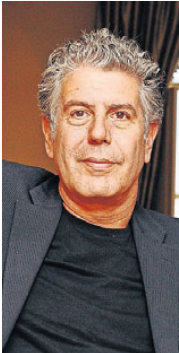
break in the weather (so) we planted quite a bit of acreage," he said. "Everything that we planted in May we ended up replanting five or six weeks later, because once the rain started it didn't stop for that period of time. When we were finally able to get into the fields again, it was June so we were trying to catch up and do April, May and June all in one month."

Shannon and Craig Higginbotham, who run Cheyenne's Roadside Market

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Craig Higginbotham, of Cheyenne's Road Market in Evesham, tosses a watermelon to his wife, Shannon. [KELLY KULTYS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



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Defense bill to benefit off-base projects

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This year's annual defense policy bill is now on President Donald Trump's desk and includes language allowing the Department of Defense to help pay for off-base infrastructure projects that benefit military installations and families.

The Senate voted Wednesday to give final congressional approval to the National Defense Authorization Act, which authorizes military spending for the approaching 2019 fiscal year and establishes numerous defense policies and actions.

The final bill was negotiated by a conference of lawmakers from both the House and Senate because the two chambers previously approved different versions of the measure.

The Senate voted 87-10 to approve the compromise. The House approved it last week by a 359-54 vote.

Both of New Jersey's senators, Democrats Bob Menendez and Cory Booker, voted in favor of the compromise bill, as did all three of the House members representing Burlington County: Reps. Tom MacArthur, R-3rd of Toms River; Donald Norcross, D-1st of Camden; and Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd of Ventnor.

The final compromise bill authorizes \$716 billion in total defense spending, including \$639.1 billion in base spending and \$69 billion for overseas missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and other locations abroad.

The measure includes scores of specific funding measures, including \$51 million for construction projects on

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Customers shop at Hunter's Farm Market in Cinnaminson. [NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

## SEASON

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in Evesham, were nervous they were going to lose their entire melon crop.

"The biggest problem we had was our watermelon crop — it looked like a lake," Shannon Higginbotham said. "My husband went out there and just back-breakingly dug trenches and got the water off of our plants."

In the end, he ended up saving the crops, and so far, they're some of the best watermelons the couple has had, but for weeks they thought they were gone, Higginbotham said.

"We were terrified that we weren't going to have watermelons," she said. "This was definitely — I wouldn't say the worst spring but I would say it was definitely up there in the top three."

The weather didn't just affect traditional farmers, but also beekeepers like Dave Frank, of Turtle Creek Bees in Springfield.

"We're just starting to take off honey now and harvest from the spring nectar flow, a little late," he said. "I would say that because of the cold, wet weather, the early nectar forging and pollen forging by bees was hindered and reduced."

Early production was not good this year because the bees didn't leave their hives to go out and gather nectar, Frank said. However, the cooler weather kept many plants blooming until late June, so Frank said he's hoping the extended season will help him out in the long run.

"It remains to be seen what our harvest really is but I remain hopeful," he said.

The cold, wet weather caused other delays across the region for many farms, although some said they've caught up.

"The challenging part for us for what we grow here was the cooler temperatures," said Amy Zorn, who runs Hunter's Farm Market in Cinnaminson. "It was not warming up as much as it usually should have in a 'perfect spring' so to speak. So our soil wasn't able to retain that heat and it was cooling off at night — that slows sweet corn down a little bit."

Since then, however, her crops have mostly caught up within about three to four days of their usual schedule.

Douglas Fisher, New Jersey State Secretary of Agriculture, said he's seen many farmers like Zorn end up with good results this summer, despite the slower than usual start.

"Every year presents a new set of circumstances that they



A watermelon bitten by a deer lies on the ground at Cheyenne's Road Market in Evesham. [KELLY KULTYS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Deer tracks line the fields of Cheyenne's Road Market in Evesham. Deer have been an issue for many Burlington County farmers this year. [KELLY KULTYS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

have to weave around and adjust to," he said. "We've had some great results. As a state we're doing quite well."

### Delays and deer

Still, grain farmers were some of the hardest hit as the spring weather made it difficult for them to plant their crop, throwing off their planting and growing schedules, which set them back weeks. The delays have made their young crops more susceptible to deer, especially since now the animals are getting the crops right as they start to grow.

"I think the problem's compounded this year because there's so many late planted young soybeans around and the later in the season it gets, it seems like the more deer damage we observe," Hlubik said.

He walked through one of the fields he planted full of soybeans in Springfield in June, examining the remnants of his planted beans.

"Normally this field under ideal circumstances should be between ankle and knee-high at this point and the deer just consistently grazed it off," he said.

Hlubik said he and his farming partner, Dave Forsyth also of North Hanover, have lost quite a lot of money from fields that were damaged by herds of deer.

"Soybeans were still \$10 (a bushel) last year — that was a case where there were about 35 bushels that we never harvested so that's \$35,000 just off that one piece of property in gross sales that we lost," he said.

Vegetable farmers, like the Higginbothams, had their own share of deer problems, especially since if a deer takes a bite out of one of their products, they can't use it.

The Higginbothams went to collect watermelons last Friday and found a few lying on the ground with bites taken out of them.

"If they hoof a cantaloupe for moisture, you're not going to buy a cantaloupe with a hoof mark," Hlubith said. "It's just an issue for every commodity group in the state."

Bob Lounsberry, of Springfield, who just entered his 44th year of farming, said the deer have become more of a problem than ever — so much so that he's cutting back.

"The deer in northern Burlington County are out of control, especially this year — the soybean crop can't grow fast enough to stay ahead of the deer grazing them off," he said. "I have personally given up planting certain tracts of land because of the deer pressure in (Springfield)."

Shinn said he's had over 30 to 40 deer on one of his soybean fields at a time. That number has been growing over the last three to four years, he estimated. In previous years, farmers planned for some of their crops to be lost to wild animals, but now the population has been ruining entire sections of fields, if not the entire field itself.

Craig Higginbotham said he specifically planted soybeans in between his rows of crops to attract the deer to those instead of his fruits and vegetables.

### Commodity pricing

The Higginbothams plant more than 50 different types of crops, which Shannon Higginbotham said can help stave off a rough year for one of their products. For example, their lettuce crop this year was less than normal and some of their tomatoes are running behind schedule, but their melons and peaches have helped make up the difference.

"I am very grateful right now, I'm feeling very blessed that everything straightened itself out because it was looking for a while like a devastating year," she said.

For grain farmers, who had traditionally relied on soybeans as their "cash crop," lower commodity prices as well as potential effects from federal tariffs could threaten their bottom lines. China announced in July that it was would issue "retaliatory

tariffs" on American goods, after the United States announced it was raising tariffs on about \$34 billion of imports from China.

In June, the Communist Party newspaper, People's Daily, listed some of the goods that could be affected by Chinese tariffs, including soybeans, pork and electric vehicles.

At the start of July, prices hovered around \$8.50 a bushel, according to MacroTrends, which analyzes historical trends of commodity prices.

On July 24, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced it would authorize up to \$12 billion in programs to "assist farmers in response to trade damage from unjustified retaliation."

The prices have slowly started to rebound. As of July 31, the price was up to about \$9.08. Still, prices were as high as \$10 per bushel last July.

"With the grain prices the way they are, what we're selling, is a big time low again, we can't afford any loss," Shinn said.

Lounsberry said this is one of the worst years he's seen in terms of soybean prices.

"Currently the price of soybeans are the same as when I started farming back in 1974, but our costs have increased five to 10 times," he said.

"We've got low commodity prices, we've dealt with weather situations and deer pressure that has cost our operation realistically several hundred thousand dollars in profit," Hlubik added.

Fisher said he was hopeful that the new plan for the Trump administration could help alleviate some of the farmers concerns.

"Because of trade policies in the administration, nationally, the grain farmers are skittish about what price they're going to be able to get in the grain markets," he said.

He said his department will work closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency to make sure that funding goes to where it is needed.

Hlubik and Forsyth said they're nervous they haven't seen the full impact of the tariffs just yet, and aren't sure about the plan.

"We've had a lot of lost marketing opportunities since this has begun and we were hoping for the longest time it was going to be nothing more than rhetoric," he said. "The Trump administration did come out with a \$12 billion announcement, but that's a Band-Aid not a cure. Band-Aid's don't do much for amputations."

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*