

\$1 million crop loss in storm

By Jeff Kaye

Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County's agricultural industry suffered more than \$1 million in crop damage in the storm that began Jan. 4, according to a preliminary report.

Agricultural commissioner John Simmen, who made the estimate, said the figure could increase as growers and county officials continue to assess the damage.

The loss represents less than 1 percent of the county's \$118 million agricultural business, the largest industry in the county.

Hardest hit were strawberry growers, with an estimated \$376,000 loss resulting from erosion, silting and floodwaters.

"A lot of our strawberries were underwater," Simmen said.

Also high on the damage list were apple growers with a \$298,500 loss and artichoke growers with \$220,000 in damages.

Simmen said the damage estimates were made by contacting the largest growers and asking them to determine losses. Some avocado, flower, mushroom and road crops also were lost in the storm's fury.

It is unlikely the damage will affect produce prices, however. "Our growing area is not that big to affect the market," Simmen said.

"The biggest problem now," he said, "is getting the spring crops in the ground."

"They are going to miss the early spring market," Simmen said. The absence of Santa Cruz County produce in the markets will mean a boost for Salinas Valley growers, who sustained less damage, he said.

Ironically, the rain and chilly air that followed it may prove beneficial to growers in the county's \$15.4 million apple industry. Some growers found fresh soil pushed onto their land by overflowing waterways nearby. But more important was the chill after the rains, which helped strengthen apple blossoms and consequently may mean a better apple.