

## **Hailstorm Hits Armenian Farmers Hard**

**Author:** [Marianna Ghahramanyan](#)

Protesters say they face financial ruin after hail defence system fails to save crops.

Farmers in the Armavir region, Armenia's breadbasket, fear that emergency government assistance following a disastrous hailstorm will not save them from bankruptcy.

Hail fell for just half an hour on May 12, but that was enough to devastate orchards and vegetables across an area of 170 square kilometres belonging to more than 12,000 farmers.

Asatur Hayrapetyan, a resident of Nor Armavir, one of 46 villages badly hit by the storm, told IWPR that although he saved some of his cherry harvest, the fruit was so damaged that he was unable to sell it at market in the capital in Yerevan.

He said cherries were selling at between 800 and 1,000 drams or 2-2.50 US dollars a kilogram, but he had failed to find buyers even at 300 drams a kilo.

"We gathered whatever was left as best we could and took it to market, but even at that low price no one wanted to buy it. They wouldn't even pay pennies," he said.

He said his cherry and peach trees and grapevines were totally destroyed.

"Nothing was left but the bare branches. I'll probably have to chop it all down to have something to burn this winter," he said.

Armenia has a hail defence service which uses propane to make loud bangs that are said to disrupt the formation of hailstones. The emergencies ministry said that the network of 69 stations in the Armavir region was put into action, but it did not have the coverage to protect the whole area from damage.

"The apparatus is automatic and our hail defence stations fired around 50,000 [sonic] shots at the clouds," Robert Hovsepyan, director of the agency which operates the stations, told A1+ television. "However, because the number of anti-hail stations is limited, and the hail was very heavy, it was impossible to prevent damage completely."

He said another 170 stations would be needed to provide full protection to the country's crops in the event of light hail. In a heavy storm, the agency could give no guarantees.

Hrant Bagratyan, a former prime minister and now a member of parliament for the opposition Armenian National Congress, said the poor harvest would inevitably affect the already weak state of the economy.

"In total, it will reduce the level of agricultural production by three or four per cent, and cut gross domestic product by 0.6 to 0.8 per cent," he said.

On May 20, farmers demanding compensation from the government blocked the main highway connecting Armavir with Yerevan, and several smaller roads.

"Our village has lost everything - 4,000 tonnes of apricots and 3,000 tonnes of grapes," protestor Arthur Mkrtchyan told the news website [www.tert.am](http://www.tert.am). "They have promised us an answer, and the head of the regional administration has come and seen with his own eyes that there's nothing left."

Two days after the protest, Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan, accompanied by the agriculture minister and the head of the central bank, came to the region to meet farmers and discuss their problems.

The government announced it would exempt the residents of the 46 villages worst-affected from land tax, while areas that had suffered some crop losses would be partly exempted. There would also be reductions in the amount villagers have to pay for water, and farmers' debts to lending institutions could be temporarily frozen if need be.

Sargsyan also called for hail defence stations to be installed in every village in the Armavir region. The 50 new stations will cost around 350 million drams, around 850,000 dollars.

The poorest villagers will also receive financial compensation and free seeds for next year's planting.

But Hayrapetyan, the farmer from Nor Armavir, was doubtful he would benefit from these measures.

"I don't expect anything good from these talks. I have no hopes," he said. "We want them to declare the

village a disaster area, so that some help can come in from outside. The biggest region, the one that feeds Armenia, the one that produces a good harvest, is now starving. If there is no help, the village's population will just leave."

He said that land taxes were minimal compared with the losses the farmers had suffered, and that the residents likeliest to receive help were those who had sold most of their land and were thus registered as living in poverty.

Hayrapetyan said he had debts of 2.5 million drams and had been counting on a profit of five or six million when the harvest came in. Now that his crops had been destroyed, he had no way of making the interest payments.

Arayik Martirosyan, a resident of the village of Aknashen who said he lost two-fifths of his crop, worth around 600,000 drams, was similarly sceptical about promises of government assistance.

"Even if they do something, we're living in Armenia. Everyone knows how things work here, and what happens before anything reaches the farmers. I have no expectations," he said. "I'm just lucky I didn't take out any loans."

**Marianna Ghahramanyan is a reporter for Armnews TV in Armenia.**

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