

Twister Takes Out Nearly 220K Chickens in Mississippi

ADRIAN SAINZ, Associated Press

NOXAPATER, Miss. (AP) — There's nothing left of the poultry farm owned by Charlie and Cindy Wilkes save for splintered wood, twisted metal and scores of dead chickens pungently rotting on the land.

A large tornado that tore through the East Mississippi community of Noxapater on Monday made a direct hit on Wilkes Farm. In minutes, the howling winds blew away eight aluminum- and wood-framed poultry houses, each holding 28,500 broilers apiece.

Few of the roughly 220,000 birds survived the storm, which struck down other chicken farms around this region of pine and oak forests and lone country roads. The 15-day-old chickens that survived walked among dead birds Wednesday morning, picking at the ground as workers from Tyson Foods tried to corral them.

Cindy Wilkes said the tornado struck at the family livelihood, but she feels blessed she and her loved ones survived. She, her husband and their two daughters said prayers as the tornado rolled through their home, hidden in an underground storm shelter.

"We've lost our farm and we lost our home, but we're alive," she said.

The storm badly damaged the home and nearly pulled their shelter from the ground. Pieces of aluminum, dangling in trees, were once the frames of the long, rectangular chicken houses.

Ray Ables, a production manager for Tyson, said he has never seen a farm as large as the Wilkes' suffer so much damage. He said Tyson, which has about 1,500 chicken houses in Mississippi, will help with the cleanup and hopes to work with the Wilkes when they rebuild.

The Wilkes have a contract with Tyson, which supplies the chickens and collects live birds for processing before it's sold to Tyson's customers.

Area farm owners estimate that about 30 chicken houses were damaged or destroyed, along with vehicles, offices and the houses and mobile homes of those who live there.

Cindy Wilkes got a call from a man in Columbus, about 50 miles away. He found a stub from one of the Wilkes' business checks blown into his yard.

It could take months, but the Wilkes have insurance and plan to rebuild.

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Charlie Wilkes estimates his loss at about \$1.5 million in chicken houses alone.

On Wednesday, Tyson workers wore blue protective suits and clear, boot-like shoe coverings as they walked among the chicken carcasses. The live birds would be put down humanely and buried along with the dead fowl and debris of the chicken houses, Cindy Wilkes said.

A couple of miles away from the Wilkes Farm, Terry Hartness described how the tornado came in from the west and decimated 12 chicken houses there. Hartness sold the farm, which he had owned for about 14 years, on Friday. That was just three days before the tornado hit.

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