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Gov. Schwarzenegger, top center, and members of his Cabinet meet Thursday at the Dinuba Vocational Center with local leaders and farmers about the recent freeze disaster. The governor acknowledged the wide-ranging effects of the freeze and pledged his help.

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Governor promises more help for victims of freeze

Schwarzenegger makes his second trip to the Valley since declaring emergency.

By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee

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DINUBA — Gov. Schwarzenegger and other officials said more help is coming to farmers and workers hurt by this month's freeze.

In his second trip to the Valley since declaring a state of emergency in 17 California counties, the governor met Thursday with about 50 representatives of agriculture, farm labor and local government at the Dinuba Vocational Center. The center is one of 19 that Schwarzenegger designated throughout the state to provide unemployment, food-stamp and other aid services to people affected by the freeze.

Earlier Thursday, the governor signed an executive order waiving a one-week waiting period for people seeking unemployment benefits.

"The freeze has thrown a lot of people out of work, and this way we can provide quick help to the people who need it right away," Schwarzenegger said.

The governor acknowledged that the wide-ranging effects of the freeze on Valley farmers, farmworkers, businesses and residents and pledged that his administration will do whatever is necessary to help freeze victims.

"The Valley is very important," he said. "What goes on here in the Valley affects all of us in California."

Food and Agriculture Secretary A.G. Kawamura said 10 straight days of subfreezing temperatures in the state "make it the most extreme and widespread freeze we've ever seen, certainly in my lifetime."

Kawamura said damage to citrus and other crops is predicted to exceed \$1 billion.

Also with Schwarzenegger on Thursday were Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, Emergency Services Director Henry Renteria, and Labor and Workforce Development Secretary Vicky Bradshaw.

Tulare County Supervisor Connie Conway said Bradshaw brought good news: The county will receive a \$1 million state grant to retrain workers who lost jobs to crop damage.

Conway said the county sought the grant after last summer's heat wave. The county was turned down then, Conway said, "but today Secretary Bradshaw told us that within a week she's sending that money to us to use for freeze-related employment retraining."

"I wish I could say that's all we need, but I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth," Conway added.

State Sen. Abel Maldonado, R-Santa Maria, and Assembly Member Nicole Parra, D-Hanford, talked about their legislation to help out-of-work laborers by raising the limit on income they can

have before losing unemployment benefits.

Their bill calls for raising the limit from \$25 a week to \$200.

"We have to help our farmworkers, because the crop is gone," said Maldonado, who is also a farmer.

Parra announced the state Public Utilities Commission voted to allow growers to defer their utility bills.

Parra added that while efforts for insurance, unemployment and food stamps will help many people, she urged the governor and nonprofit aid efforts to remember the plight of undocumented farmworkers.

"As the Valley comes together, we shouldn't be looking at whether people are here with their papers or not," Parra said. "They're picking in the fields; every night that we eat, someone picked that food for us. We don't know where they came from, but we know they're doing God's work."

Schwarzenegger said that while it's difficult for the state to provide aid directly to undocumented workers, more funds can be routed to nonprofits such as churches and food banks.

Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, urged the governor to provide \$15 million from state reserve funds for food banks he said are being depleted by people seeking help.

"Food banks are running out of food," he said, adding that the state's Account for Economic Uncertainties currently has about \$2.4 billion. "I think we can spare \$15 million to help the food banks," Florez said.

Schwarzenegger said he liked Florez's idea.

"If there is more money needed for food programs, we should provide it," the governor said. "I would go beyond and say I wouldn't limit it to \$15 million; maybe it's \$15.5 million or \$17million."

Florez was delighted by the answer.

"We see that as a commitment," he said. "We're going to hold him to it."

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Gov. Schwarzenegger, shown on crutches Thursday in Dinuba, said it's difficult for the state to provide aid directly to undocumented workers affected by the freeze, but that more funds can be routed to nonprofits.

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