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**Mike Smith, outreach manager for the Texas Rural Mediation Service said his group works to help Texans solve disputes out of court and in a timely manner.**

***--Photo courtesy of TRMS***

**Service helping rural Texans**

**By CODY BEDELL, Country World Staff Writer**

August 21, 2008 - When disaster strikes, Texans dealing with crop loss and insurance issues are able to turn to Texas Rural Mediation Services (TRMS) for help.

"Our service is based in Lubbock, and we deal with. but are not limited to, domestic relations," said Outreach Manager of the dispute resolution center, Mike Smith. "Our group was appointed directly by the governor, and we handle disputes ranging from boundary disagreements to creditor disputes."

With the support of Sen. Robert Duncan and Rep. Larry Combest, the South Plains Association of Governments became the USDA-certified agricultural mediation service provider for the state of Texas. The group, based in Lubbock, was appointed to administer the USDA agricultural mediation program for the state.

"Recently, we have reached out to farmers and ranchers that were hit by the hurricane and have provided them with mediation to solve disputes with banks and insurance companies," said Smith. "We are basically a neutral third-party, and we consider both sides in the dispute. Our goal is to help both parties come up with an agreement before any litigation. For most cases, disputes that we have mediated have been resolved quicker and cheaper that being settled in court. The problem gets solved and both parties move on. The purpose of TRMS is to mediate between both parties to come up with a solution that benefits both sides, not to decide who is right and wrong."

TRMS, not only mediated disputes from Hurricane Dolly, they have also mediated disputes from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"Our group became well recognized during the hurricane season that brought Katrina and Rita," recalled Smith. "It proved to many people in the state how useful and effective our group can be. With wide-spread areas of natural disaster, it is certain that their will be disputes about claiming insurance or settlements with banks."

TRMS has special mediators located throughout the state that receive specialized training to handle issues related to rural living and agriculture in all 254 counties of the state.

Hurricanes and other natural disasters are not the only disputes that TRMS addresses.

"In the past, we have helped settle many domestic disputes whether they were in the agricultural industry or in urban areas," said Smith. "We have mediated disputes such as boundary arguments, health care, insurance, landlord-tenant issues, credit issues and disaster assistance programs."

For more information about TRMS go to www.co.lubbock.tx.us/drc/rural.htm