U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

USDA News - Lone Star State Edition - March 29, 2024

From the FSA State Executive Director

Spring has arrived and I know many of you are busy with final preparations or finishing up your planting. After you have completed plantings, I encourage you to contact your local FSA office and make an appointment to complete acreage reporting before the deadline in your area.

Earlier this week, FSA announced an authorization of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) graze and hay donations to wildfire-impacted livestock producers in Texas, Oklahoma and Nebraska. If you would like additional information on making a donation or utilizing a donation, contact your local FSA office.

I would also like to remind dairy producers that enrollment for the Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC) Program ends on April 29, 2024. DMC is a key risk management tool for dairy operations to financially endure the numerous, and often unpredictable uncertainties that adversely impact market prices for milk. To determine the appropriate level of DMC coverage for a specific dairy operation, producers can use the online dairy decision tool.

As always, your Texas FSA team is here to help. For those of you who celebrate, I wish you and your family a Happy Easter weekend.

Sincerely,

Kelly Adkins
State Executive Director
Farm Service Agency - Texas

From the NRCS State Conservationist

Spring is always a time for me to reflect on how far we have come with conservation as an agency since our humble beginning on April 27, 1935, amid the Dust Bowl. I can't help but to think how proud Hugh Hammond Bennett would be to know that the agency he started is still working closely with agricultural producers to address conservation challenges on their land today. This is no more evident than now as we are helping producers in the Panhandle with technical and financial assistance to aid in their recovery from the recent wildfires.

NRCS has opened a special sign-up period through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program for producers in the panhandle who have been impacted by recent wildfires. Assistance includes practices aimed at replacing damaged infrastructure such as fencing and water resources, as well as management and recovery of affected lands. Applications must be submitted by **April 8, 2024**, to be considered for this opportunity. Contact your local NRCS office for additional information.

USDA recently launched a new Northern Bobwhite Pilot Project. This project, offered by NRCS through Working Lands for Wildlife, provides dedicated funding for fiscal year 2024 in new assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. This is for producers to help the bobwhite and other game and non-game species by managing their working lands for early successional habitat while meeting their lands natural resource and production goals. Contact your local NRCS office for more information.

NRCS and Quail Forever are also supporting northern bobwhite conservation with a new "Bobscapes" mobile app for citizen science reporting that will help researchers better understand population dynamics and help managers direct resources for habitat work where those investments will be most effective in recovering the species. For those interested, the app will connect landowners to technical experts who can make habitat recommendations and share information on voluntary cost share programs.

USDA recently announced an investment of approximately $138 million in 138 new climate-smart conservation easements, through which farmers and ranchers are conserving wetlands, grasslands and prime farmlands. Several projects in Texas were selected under Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) because of either a high threat of conversion to a non-grassland use or a high threat of conversion to a non-agricultural use. ACEP-ALE provides financial assistance to eligible entities, including land trusts and state and local units of government, for purchasing easements that protect agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land by limiting nonagricultural uses of the land.

There are so many ways that NRCS can help agricultural producers across the state. There is no better time than now to contact your local NRCS office and schedule an appointment for a conservation professional to visit your operation to discuss your conservation goals. NRCS staff are available to help you, no matter the size of your operation.

Sincerely,

Kristy Oates
State Conservationist
Natural Resources Conservation Service - Texas

USDA Authorizes Conservation Reserve Program Graze and Hay Donations to Wildfire-Impacted Livestock Producers in Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) authorizes the release of emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres nationwide to livestock producers affected by the recent wildfires in Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas.

States and counties currently affected by wildfire include:

- **Nebraska**: Custer, Lincoln and Logan
- **Oklahoma**: Beaver, Dewey, Ellis, Harper, Kay, Roger Mills, Texas, Woods and Woodward.
- **Texas**: Armstrong, Carson, Gray, Hartley, Hemphill, Hutchinson, Lipscomb, Moore, Ochiltree, Oldham, Potter, Roberts and Wheeler.

Although the Primary Nesting Season has already started in Texas, CRP participants can continue to donate emergency grazing authority to livestock producers in need during this period in counties eligible for the Livestock Forage Program (LFP) due to drought. FSA also offers non-emergency use provisions for CRP acres as an option during the Primary Nesting Season (PNS) here in Texas.

CRP Emergency Haying and Grazing

Earlier this month FSA expanded authorization of emergency haying and grazing of CRP acres to support the relocation of livestock for grazing purposes. There is no fee or annual rental payment reduction assessed for emergency haying and grazing.

Emergency haying and grazing is available until the beginning of the PNS in each state. Primary nesting season dates in Texas are enter March 1 through July 1. Emergency grazing can continue during the PNS with a 50% reduction in stocking rate if the county meets the Livestock Forage Program drought eligibility trigger of D2 for eight consecutive weeks or D3 or greater on the U.S. Drought Monitor.

How to Donate CRP Grazing and Haying Rights

Eligible CRP participants who want to donate CRP acres for the purpose of emergency grazing and haying must obtain a modified conservation plan, which includes emergency grazing requirements from either USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or the participant's Technical Service Provider before the CRP acres are hayed or grazed. To ensure emergency haying or grazing of CRP acres is only being utilized by livestock producers adversely impacted by the wildfire, the livestock producer must file a CCC-576 (Notice of Loss) or provide a written certification to be included in the CRP contract file.

Haying or grazing activities are not authorized if these activities will cause long-term damage to the vegetative cover on the land as determined on a contract-by-contract basis. The CRP participant is responsible for non-compliance with the CRP contract provisions.

Due to privacy laws, FSA cannot release the names of producers willing to assist livestock producers in the fire-impact areas without their written consent. CRP participants must voluntarily disclose their willingness to assist livestock producers and consent to the disclosure of their personal information before FSA can release the information to livestock producers seeking assistance.

CRP participants who are interested in donating CRP grazing and haying privileges should contact their local USDA Service Center to confirm CRP practice eligibility and obtain approval from FSA prior to grazing or haying eligible CRP acres.

Non-Emergency Grazing and Haying of CRP Acres

Non-emergency grazing and haying activities can occur according to the CRP participant's conservation plan during drought or natural disaster conditions, but the site conditions should be taken into consideration and the plan modified, as needed. Non-emergency harvesting for hay is authorized once during the approved event and no later than Aug. 31. Participants must leave 25% of the contract acres unharvested or hayed. Non-emergency grazing must not exceed 120 days. During the PNS, there must be a 50% carrying capacity reduction. For both non-emergency grazing and haying, there will be a 25% annual rental payment reduction.

CRP participants who are interested in donating CRP grazing and haying privileges; offering or utilizing non-emergency use privileges should contact their local USDA Service Center to confirm CRP practice eligibility and obtain approval from FSA prior to grazing or haying eligible CRP acres.

Additional Wildfire Recovery Program Flexibilities

In addition to CRP emergency and non-emergency grazing and haying provisions, FSA recently announced policy flexibilities for several key disaster assistance programs to aid agricultural producers who have experienced significant livestock, feed, forage and infrastructure loss from recent wildfires. See March 8, 2024, news release for more information.

Online Wildfire Recovery Resources

On farmers.gov, the Wildfire Recovery Webpage, Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool, Disaster Assistance-at-a-Glance fact sheet, and Loan Assistance Tool can help producers and landowners determine program or loan options. For assistance with a crop insurance claim, producers and landowners should contact their crop insurance agent. For FSA and NRCS programs, they should contact their local USDA Service Center.

FSA Investing in Resilience

The programs FSA offers can often be the best news possible for a producer living in that uncertainty. In 2023, investments from our programs made positive impacts on the lives of many agricultural producers, including those experiencing distress or those picking up the pieces after natural disasters — investments that will pay dividends for many years to come.

Our dedicated employees delivered more than $16.9 billion in farm programs and farm loans throughout the year. Some noteworthy accomplishments included helping distressed borrowers, improving our processes and programs, and providing support to our producers in times of hardship. These accomplishments were borne out of our concerted effort to approach our policies and programs with fresh eyes, creative ideas and a common purpose guided by the goal of fairly and equitably delivering the most assistance to the most producers possible.

We're proud of our work in 2023, and our efforts to support our nation's farmers and ranchers complement the hard work of the Biden-Harris Administration over the past three years.

Read more about FSA's successes in 2023 by visiting farmers.gov/blog/fsa-investing-in-resilience.

Dairy Producers Can Enroll for 2024 Dairy Margin Coverage Beginning Feb. 28

Starting Feb. 28, dairy producers will be able to enroll for 2024 Dairy Margin Coverage (DMC), an important safety net program offered through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that provides producers with price support to help offset milk and feed price differences. This year's DMC signup begins Feb. 28, 2024, and ends April 29, 2024. For those who sign up for 2024 DMC coverage, payments may begin as soon as March 4, 2024, for any payments that triggered in January 2024.

USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) has revised the regulations for DMC to allow eligible dairy operations to make a one-time adjustment to established production history. This adjustment will be accomplished by combining previously established supplemental production history with DMC production history for those dairy operations that participated in Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage during a prior coverage year. DMC has also been authorized through calendar year 2024. Congress passed a 2018 Farm Bill extension requiring these regulatory changes to the program.

DMC is a voluntary risk management program that offers protection to dairy producers when the difference between the all-milk price and the average feed price (the margin) falls below a certain dollar amount selected by the producer. In 2023, Dairy Margin Coverage payments triggered in 11 months including two months, June and July, where the margin fell below the catastrophic level of $4.00 per hundredweight, a first for Dairy Margin Coverage or its predecessor Margin Protection Program.

2024 DMC Coverage and Premium Fees

FSA has revised DMC regulations to extend coverage for calendar year 2024, which is retroactive to Jan. 1, 2024, and to provide an adjustment to the production history for dairy operations with less than 5 million pounds of production. In previous years, smaller dairy operations could establish a supplemental production history and receive Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage. For 2024, dairy producers can establish one adjusted base production history through DMC for each participating dairy operation to better reflect the operation's current production.

For 2024 DMC enrollment, dairy operations that established supplemental production history through Supplemental Dairy Margin Coverage for coverage years 2021 through 2023, will combine the supplemental production history with established production history for one adjusted base production history.

For dairy operations enrolled in 2023 DMC under a multi-year lock-in contract, lock-in eligibility will be extended until Dec. 31, 2024. In addition, dairy operations enrolled in multi-year lock-in contracts are eligible for the discounted DMC premium rate during the 2024 coverage year. To confirm 2024 DMC lock-in coverage or opt out in favor of an annual contract for 2024, dairy operations having lock-in contracts must enroll during the 2024 DMC enrollment period.

DMC offers different levels of coverage, even an option that is free to producers, minus a $100 administrative fee. The administrative fee is waived for dairy producers who are considered limited resource, beginning, socially disadvantaged or a military veteran. To determine the appropriate level of DMC coverage for a specific dairy operation, producers can use the online dairy decision tool.

DMC Payments

DMC payments are calculated using updated feed and premium hay costs, making the program more reflective of actual dairy producer expenses. These updated feed calculations use 100% premium alfalfa hay.

More Information

USDA also offers other risk management tools for dairy producers, including the Dairy Revenue Protection (DRP) plan that protects against a decline in milk revenue (yield and price) and the Livestock Gross Margin (LGM) plan, which provides protection against the loss of the market value of milk minus the feed costs. Both DRP and LGM livestock insurance policies are offered through the Risk Management Agency. Producers should contact their local crop insurance agent for more information.

For more information on DMC, visit the DMC webpage or contact your local USDA Service Center.

USDA Expands Insurance Option for Nursery Growers to All States

USDA is expanding crop insurance tailored for nursery producers to all counties in all states. Nursery Value Select (NVS) is a pilot program that enables nursery producers to select the dollar amount of coverage that best fits their risk management needs. Its expansion is part of USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) efforts to provide insurance options for a broader group of producers, including specialty crop producers.

NVS provides similar but improved coverage to the longstanding Nursery Field Grown and Container (FG&C) program. NVS also covers field grown and containerized nursery plants and offers coverage levels between catastrophic and 75 percent.

Prior to this expansion, NVS was only available in select counties in these states: Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. Beginning with the 2025 crop year, NVS will now be available in all counties in all states. The sales closing date for the 2025 crop year is May 1, 2024, or September 1, 2024, as provided in the actuarial documents.

NVS was first available in the 2021 crop year, and producers insured more than $460 million in liabilities in crop year 2023.

Crop insurance is sold and delivered solely through private crop insurance agents. A list of crop insurance agents is available at all USDA Service Centers and online at the RMA Agent Locator. Learn more about crop insurance and the modern farm safety net at rma.usda.gov or by contacting your RMA Regional Office.

Emerging Findings on the Effects of Cover Crops on Grassland Birds

As the use of cover crops to improve soil health and reduce water quality concerns on working cropland has increased in recent years, questions have emerged regarding the value of cover crops to wildlife. For example, do cover crops provide needed habitat for grassland birds, a group that has experienced widespread population decline in recent decades? What is the value of cover crop fields to grassland birds during the winter, spring migration, and breeding periods compared to cropland fields without cover crops or areas of perennial cover?

On **April 25 at 2:00 p.m. eastern**, Dr. Adam Janke of Iowa State University and Dr. David Buehler of the University of Tennessee will provide answers to these questions and more during our free, one-hour Conservation Outcomes Webinar. This webinar will share findings from recent studies examining bird use of cover crops in Iowa and Tennessee conducted in partnership with USDA's Conservation Effects Assessment Project. Findings may be used to support on-the-ground cropland management decisions informed by a better understanding of the potential roll of cover crops in grassland bird conservation efforts.

Registration is not required. Access instructions are available on the Conservation Outcomes Webinar Series webpage along with a calendar of upcoming webinars through 2024.

USDA Microloans Help Farmers Purchase Farmland and Improve Property

Farmers can use USDA farm ownership microloans to buy and improve property. These microloans are especially helpful to beginning or underserved farmers, U.S. veterans looking for a career in farming, and those who have small and mid-sized farming operations. Microloans have helped farmers and ranchers with operating costs, such as feed, fertilizer, tools, fencing, equipment, and living expenses since 2013.

Microloans can also help with farmland and building purchases and soil and water conservation improvements. FSA designed the expanded program to simplify the application process, expand eligibility requirements and expedite smaller real estate loans to help farmers strengthen their operations. Microloans provide up to $50,000 to qualified producers and can be issued to the applicant directly from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA).

To learn more about the FSA microloan program, contact your local USDA Service Center or visit fsa.usda.gov/microloans.

FSA Offers Joint Financing Option on Direct Farm Ownership Loans

The USDA Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Direct Farm Ownership loans can help farmers and ranchers become owner-operators of family farms, improve and expand current operations, increase agricultural productivity, and assist with land tenure to save farmland for future generations.

There are three types of Direct Farm Ownership Loans: regular, down payment and joint financing. FSA also offers a Direct Farm Ownership Microloan option for smaller financial needs up to $50,000.

Joint financing allows FSA to provide more farmers and ranchers with access to capital. FSA lends up to 50 percent of the total amount financed. A commercial lender, a State program or the seller of the property being purchased, provides the balance of loan funds, with or without an FSA guarantee. The maximum loan amount for a joint financing loan is $600,000, and the repayment period for the loan is up to 40 years.

The operation must be an eligible farm enterprise. Farm Ownership loan funds cannot be used to finance nonfarm enterprises and all applicants must be able to meet general eligibility requirements. Loan applicants are also required to have participated in the business operations of a farm or ranch for at least three years out of the 10 years prior to the date the application is submitted. The applicant must show documentation that their participation in the business operation of the farm or ranch was not solely as a laborer.

For more information about farm loans, contact your local USDA Service Center or visit fsa.usda.gov.

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Not all job vacancy announcements will be shared via email, but you can view a current list of all job openings at any time by visiting usajobs.gov.

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