



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

USDA Montana Newsletter - December 2023

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Montana FSA Program Dates/Deadlines

USDA in Montana reminds agricultural producers of important Farm Service Agency (FSA) program dates. Contact your local service center to apply and with any questions. Visit online at farmers.gov and fsa.usda.gov/mt.

Dec. 4: Voted FSA County Committee Election Ballots to be returned to the FSA County Office or post-marked.

Dec. 31: 2024 NAP Application for Coverage Deadline for Honey

Dec. 31: deadline for requesting Extraordinary Measures assistance under IRA Section 22006

Dec. 31: deadline for requesting Extraordinary Measures assistance and Cash Flow Based Assistance IRA payments under IRA Section 22006

Jan. 13, 2024: Inflation Reduction Act Assistance for Producers Who Experienced Discrimination in USDA Farm Loan Programs application period closes. Applications are due January 13, 2024. To ensure timely processing, there will be no extensions to the deadline. [Read more here.](#)

Jan. 30, 2024: Application deadline for 2023 LFP. Producers must complete a CCC-853 and provide required supporting documentation no later than January 30, 2024, for 2023 losses.

Jan. 30, 2024: Deadline to file a notice of loss and application for payment for ELAP.

The 30-calendar-day (livestock and farm-raised fish) and 15-calendar-day (honeybees) timeframes to submit a notice of loss from the date the loss is apparent for the 2023 and subsequent program years, has been waived. The new deadline for filing a notice of loss under ELAP will be the same as the final date to submit an application for payment, which is 30 calendar days following the program year of which the loss occurred.

Feb. 29, 2024: Deadline to file a notice of loss and application for payment for LIP.

The 30-calendar-day timeframe to submit a notice of loss from the date the loss is apparent for the 2023 and subsequent program years has been waived. The new deadline for filing a notice of loss under LIP will be the same as the final date to submit an application for payment, which is 60 calendar days after the calendar year in which the eligible loss condition occurred.

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From the Desk of the SED: Maureen Wicks

The holiday season is upon us here in Montana and with it comes winter. It's a time when many people enjoy winter activities such as skijoring, skating, skiing, snowmobiling and building a snowman. It's the season of giving and remembering what's important. It's also a time that many of our livestock producers remain ever vigilant in the stewardship over their herds. The Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) is available for eligible producers who suffer losses from an eligible weather event. If any producer suffers winter losses, please reach out to your local County Office to let them know.

Stay warm and stay safe this holiday season. It's my hope and wish that you all enjoy time with your families and friends.

From all of us here at the USDA Montana Farm Service Agency, Happy Holidays!

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USDA Makes Producer-Friendly Change to 2023 Notice of Loss Requirements for Two Livestock Disaster Assistance Programs

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has waived certain notice of loss requirements for 2023 for the [Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish](#) (ELAP) and [Livestock Indemnity Program](#) (LIP). In an effort to streamline assistance to support access to critical 2023 natural disaster recovery assistance, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) is waiving the requirement to submit ELAP or LIP notices of loss within a pre-determined number of days for 2023. Instead, producers have the flexibility to submit 2023 notices of loss as soon as possible, once losses are realized, following a natural disaster event or no later than the established annual program application for payment deadlines for each program. FSA county committees are also being asked to re-evaluate 2023 ELAP and LIP late-filed notices of loss to determine if the waiver applies.

Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish

ELAP provides recovery assistance to eligible producers of livestock, honeybee, and farm-raised fish losses due to an eligible adverse weather or loss condition, including blizzards, disease, water shortages and

wildfires. ELAP covers grazing and feed losses, transportation of water and feed to livestock and hauling livestock to grazing acres. ELAP also covers certain mortality losses for livestock including honeybees and farm-raised fish as well as honeybee hive losses. ELAP is designed to address losses not covered by other FSA disaster assistance programs.

For 2023, FSA is waiving the regulatory requirement for producers who are eligible for ELAP to file a notice of loss with FSA within 30 calendar days from when the loss first became apparent for livestock and farm-raised fish and 15 calendar days for honeybees. Under this waiver, notices of loss are to be completed by the eligible producer and submitted to FSA no later than the annual program application deadline of January 30 following the program year in which the loss occurred. Therefore, producers who incurred ELAP-eligible losses in 2023, will need to submit a notice of loss by Jan. 30, 2024.

Livestock Indemnity Program

LIP provides disaster recovery assistance to livestock owners and contract growers who experience livestock deaths, in excess of normal mortality caused by eligible loss conditions including adverse weather, disease and attacks by animals reintroduced into the wild by the federal government or protected by federal law, including wolves and avian predators. LIP also helps livestock owners who must sell livestock at a reduced price because of an injury from certain loss conditions.

For 2023, FSA is waiving the regulatory requirement for producers who are eligible for LIP to file a notice of loss within 30 calendar days from when the loss first became apparent. Under this waiver, producers are still required to complete and submit the notice of loss to FSA no later than the annual program payment application date, which is 60 calendar days following the program year in which the loss occurred. The LIP payment application and notice of loss deadline is Feb. 29, 2024, for the 2023 program year.

2023 Disapproved Applications

FSA county committees will review all notices of loss for both ELAP and LIP that were previously disapproved for the 2023 program year due to late filing and re-evaluate them to determine if the waiver applies. To receive ELAP and LIP benefits, producers will still need to file an application for payment by the established program deadline for the 2023 program year. Producers who are unsure about the status of their notice of loss or application for payment, should contact their local FSA county office as soon as possible.

Supporting Documentation

Accurate records and loss documentation are critical following disaster events and are required when filing notices of loss with FSA. Acceptable loss documentation includes:

- Documentation of the number, kind, type, and weight range of livestock that have died, supplemented, if possible, by dated photographs or video records of ownership and losses. This may include contemporaneous producer records that include the date of birth, date of death, weather conditions, cause of death, etc.
- Rendering truck receipts by kind, type, and weight - important to document prior to disposal.
- Beginning inventory supported by birth recordings or purchase receipts.
- Documentation from Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, Department of Natural Resources, or other sources to substantiate eligible death losses due to an eligible loss condition.
- Documentation that livestock were removed from grazing pastures due to an eligible adverse weather or loss condition.

- Costs of transporting livestock feed to eligible livestock, such as receipts for equipment rental fees for hay lifts and snow removal.
- Feed purchase receipts if feed supplies or grazing pastures are destroyed.
- Number of gallons of water transported to livestock due to water shortages.

More Information

The improvements to ELAP and LIP build on others made since 2021. This includes ELAP benefits for above normal costs for hauling feed and water to livestock and transporting livestock to other grazing acres during a qualifying drought. FSA also [expanded eligible livestock](#) under ELAP, LIP, and the Livestock Forage Disaster Assistance Program, and increased the LIP payment rate for beef, beefalo, bison, and dairy animals less than 250 pounds and most recently beef calves over 800 pounds. Learn about USDA disaster assistance programs on [farmers.gov](#).

On [farmers.gov](#), the [Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool](#), [Disaster-at-a-Glance fact sheet](#) and [Loan Assistance Tool](#) can help producers and landowners determine [disaster protection and recovery](#) program or loan options. For more information about FSA programs, contact your local [USDA Service Center](#).

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Every Season is Scam Season

Remember to discuss your USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) account information only with people you recognize and trust.

If you have questions about your FSA accounts, including your farm loans, contact [your local USDA Service Center](#) and/or visit [www.farmers.gov](#).

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USDA Launches Loan Assistance Tool to Enhance Equity and Customer Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a new online tool to help farmers and ranchers better navigate the farm loan application process. This uniform application process will help to ensure all farm loan applicants receive equal support and have a consistent customer experience with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) regardless of their individual circumstances.

USDA experiences a high rate of incomplete or withdrawn applications, particularly among underserved customers, due in part to a challenging and lengthy paper-based application process. The Loan Assistance Tool is available 24/7 and gives customers an online step-by-step guide that supplements the support they receive when working in person with a USDA employee, providing materials that may help an applicant prepare their loan application in one tool.

Farmers can access the Loan Assistance Tool by visiting [farmers.gov/farm-loan-assistance-tool](#) and clicking the 'Get Started' button. From here they can follow the prompts to complete the Eligibility Self-Assessment

and start the farm loan journey. The tool is built to run on any modern browser like Chrome, Edge, Firefox, or the Safari browser, and is fully functional on mobile devices. It does not work in Internet Explorer.

The Loan Assistance Tool is the first of multiple farm loan process improvements that will be available to USDA customers on farmers.gov in the future. Other improvements and tools that are anticipated to launch in 2023 include:

- A streamlined and simplified direct loan application, reduced from 29 pages to 13 pages.
- An interactive online direct loan application that gives customers a paperless and electronic signature option, along with the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns.
- An online direct loan repayment feature that relieves borrowers from the necessity of calling, mailing, or visiting a local Service Center to pay a loan installment.

Background

USDA provides access to credit to approximately 115,000 producers who cannot obtain sufficient commercial credit through direct and guaranteed farm loans. With the funds and direction Congress provided in Section 22006 of the Inflation Reduction Act, USDA is taking action to immediately [provide relief to qualifying distressed borrowers](#) whose operations are at financial risk while working on making transformational changes to loan servicing so that borrowers are provided the flexibility and opportunities needed to address the inherent risks and unpredictability associated with agricultural operations.

For more information on FSA farm loan programs, contact [your local USDA Service Center](#) and/or visit www.farmers.gov or visit fsa.usda.gov.

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USDA Updates Farm Loan Programs to Increase Equity

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is updating its farm loan programs to better support current borrowers, including historically underserved producers. These improvements are part of USDA's commitment to increase equity in all programs, including farm loans that provide important access to capital for covering operating expenses and purchasing land and equipment.

The 2018 Farm Bill authorized FSA to provide equitable relief to certain direct loan borrowers, who are non-compliant with program requirements due to good faith reliance on a material action of, advice of, or non-action from an FSA official. Previously, borrowers may have been required to immediately repay the loan or convert it to a non-program loan with higher interest rates, less favorable terms, and limited loan servicing.

Now, FSA has additional flexibilities to assist borrowers in such situations. If the agency provided incorrect guidance to an existing direct loan borrower, the agency may provide equitable relief to that borrower. FSA may assist the borrower by allowing the borrower to keep their loans at current rates or other terms received in association with the loan which was determined to be noncompliant or the borrower may receive other equitable relief for the loan as the Agency determines to be appropriate.

USDA encourages producers to reach out to their local loan officials to ensure they fully understand the wide range of loan and servicing options available that can assist them in starting, expanding or maintaining their operation.

Additional Updates

Equitable relief is one of several changes authorized by the 2018 Farm Bill that USDA has made to the direct and guaranteed loan programs. Other changes that were previously implemented include:

- Modifying the existing three-year farming experience requirement for Direct Farm Ownership loans to include additional items as acceptable experience.
- Allowing socially disadvantaged and beginning farmer applicants to receive a guarantee equal to 95%, rather than the otherwise applicable 90% guarantee.
- Expanding the definition of and providing additional benefits to veteran farmers.
- Allowing borrowers who received restructuring with a write down to maintain eligibility for an Emergency loan.
- Expanding the scope of eligible issues and persons covered under the agricultural Certified Mediation Program.

Additional information on these changes is available in the March 8, 2022 [rule on the Federal Register](#).

More Background

FSA has taken other recent steps to increase equity in its programs. Last summer, USDA announced it was providing \$67 million in competitive loans through its new Heirs' Property Relending Program to help agricultural producers and landowners resolve heirs' land ownership and succession issues. FSA also invested \$4.7 million to establish partnerships with organizations to provide outreach and technical assistance to historically underserved farmers and ranchers, which contributed to a fourfold increase in participation by historically underserved producers in the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (CFAP 2), a key pandemic assistance program, since April 2021.

Additionally, in January 2021, Secretary Vilsack announced a [temporary suspension of past-due debt collection and foreclosures](#) for distressed direct loan borrowers due to the economic hardship imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Producers can explore available loan options using the [Farm Loan Discovery Tool on farmers.gov](#) (also [available in Spanish](#)) or by contacting their local [USDA Service Center](#). Service Center staff continue to work with agricultural producers via phone, email, and other digital tools. Due to the pandemic, some USDA Service Centers are open to limited visitors. Producers can [contact their local Service Center](#) to set up an in-person or phone appointment to discuss loan options.

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USDA Updates Crop Insurance for Sugar Beets Making Early Harvest Adjustments Optional

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is revising its Sugar Beet crop insurance policy to make the early harvest adjustment feature optional for producers. USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) is offering this flexibility beginning with the 2024 crop year for most program areas and beginning with the 2025 crop year for Imperial County, California. The update is published in the [Federal Register](#).

"In direct response to feedback from the country's sugar beet growers, we are updating the Sugar Beet crop insurance policy to give producers even more flexibility," said RMA Administrator Marcia Bunker. "Having heard producers' concerns and questions, we are now making the early harvest adjustment an optional

feature of the policy, allowing producers to tailor their insurance to meet the unique risk management needs of their operations.” [Read the full news release here.](#)

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Montana Leopold Conservation Award Seeks Applicants

Nominations and applications are now being accepted for the 2024 Montana Leopold Conservation Award®.

The \$10,000 award honors ranchers, farmers and forestland owners who go above and beyond in their management of soil health, water quality and wildlife habitat on working land.

[Sand County Foundation](#) and national sponsor [American Farmland Trust](#) present the Leopold Conservation Award to private landowners in 27 states. In [Montana](#), the award is presented with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Montana Rangeland Resources Committee.

Given in honor of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, the award recognizes landowners who inspire others with their dedication to environmental improvement. In his influential 1949 book, “[A Sand County Almanac](#),” Leopold called for what he called “a land ethic,” an ethical relationship between people and the land they own and manage.

Award nominations may be submitted on behalf of a landowner, or landowners may nominate themselves. The application can be found at www.sandcountyfoundation.org/ApplyLCA.

The application deadline is March 1, 2024. Applications can be emailed to sbarta@mt.gov or postmarked by March 1, 2024, and mailed to:

Leopold Conservation Award
c/o Rangeland Resources Program Coordinator
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation
P.O. Box 414
Clyde Park, MT 59018

Applications are reviewed by an independent panel of agricultural and conservation leaders. Last year’s recipient was [Kurt and PJ Myllymaki](#) of Stanford.

The Montana Leopold Conservation Award was made possible through the generous support of the American Farmland Trust, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Rangeland Resources Committee, Sand County Foundation, Sibanye-Stillwater, AgWest Farm Credit, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, C Lazy J Livestock, Ducks Unlimited, Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, McDonald’s, Montana Farm Bureau Federation, Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, Soil and Water Conservation Society, Western Landowners Alliance, Western Sustainability Exchange, and World Wildlife Fund.

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New Book: One Man's Passion as a Steward of the Land by Ron Long

The Chouteau County Conservation District has published a book based on the scientific research and findings of the late Ron Long of Highwood, MT.

The author, Ron Long, had been a part of the conservation movement since 1969 when he joined his father to start a grass roots effort to address saline seep on the Highwood Bench and in Montana. He had been active through the years working with MSU Extension, Montana Salinity Control, Conservation Districts, NRCS and his most recent work addressing soil acidity.

The Conservation District has posted a [YouTube video](#) that highlights the book and how to get it.

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This Holiday: Decorate with Joy, Not Insects That Destroy

The holidays are a festive time. Putting up a Christmas tree, wreath, and ornaments may be part of your tradition. But, look twice before you acquire fresh plant material for your seasonal décor this year, because there may be something lurking inside. Invasive plant pests and diseases are talented hitchhikers. They may hitch a ride on your living Christmas tree, wreath, untreated firewood, or handmade ornaments. And, they aren't just unwelcome guests—these pests threaten local ecosystems and agriculture when introduced to new places.

Forests are at risk. If you move fresh plant material from a quarantine area, you could transport [tree-killing insects](#) without seeing them. Outdoor items can also harbor egg masses, which can look like dry mud or tan-colored fuzzy patches on surfaces. The culprit could be an invasive pest that feeds on and defoliates hundreds of plant species.

The good news is you can help prevent their spread:

1. Before buying holiday greenery, inspect it for signs of infestation including insects, egg masses, tunneling or holes.
2. Buy local or use certified heat-treated firewood, or gather it on site where permitted. Don't move untreated firewood.
3. Do not move plants, fruit, vegetables, or soil into your state or another state unless agricultural inspectors have cleared them.
4. Check out [APHIS' interactive maps](#) and [pests tracker](#) to familiarize yourself with quarantines in your area. Avoid moving quarantined materials.

Protect plants this holiday season. Visit <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/resources/pests-diseases/hungry-pests/What-You-Can-Do> to learn more.

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FSA Policy Reminders: [2021 Annual Notification to FSA Customers](#)

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Fax: 855-510-7028
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Contact information for your local office, visit: www.farmers.gov.

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