



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

USDA Montana Newsletter - February 2024

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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.

Feb. 29, 2024: Deadline to file a 2023 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.

March 1, 2024: Montana Leopold Conservation Award Nominations and Application deadline

March 15, 2024: Deadline to elect coverage and enroll in Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) and Price Loss Coverage (PLC) programs for the 2024 crop year.

March 15, 2024: Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) coverage closing date for all spring crops **except** spring-seeded canola, garlic, rye, speltz, triticale, wheat, ALL annual & perennial grass & mixed forage, and value-loss crops. Please note that the acreage reporting date for your NAP covered crops is the earlier of the established FSA acreage reporting date for the crop or 15 calendar days before the onset of harvest or grazing of the specific crop acreage being reported.

March 15, 2024: The next sales closing date to purchase insurance through RMA is March 15, 2024.

March 29, 2024: Bob Miller Memorial Scholarship, Native Student Summer Internship Scholarship Application deadline and National Youth Advisory Council application deadline. Please visit indianag.org/youth for a full list of requirements. If you have any questions, please contact Sunshine Tso at sunshine@indianag.org.

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From the Desk of the SED: Maureen Wicks

Presidents' Day is celebrated this month, and I want to highlight one president in particular that is near and dear to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), President Abraham Lincoln. In 1862, President Lincoln signed into law an act of Congress establishing the USDA.

In his final annual message to Congress, he referred to the USDA as "The People's Department". He saw the need for the USDA during a time when almost half of all Americans lived on farms.

Today, nearly 162 years later, we at the Farm Service Agency are still proudly serving Lincoln's vision, working hard to serve our farmers and ranchers here in Montana.

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USDA Helps Producers Prepare for and Recover from Severe Winter Weather

Winter storms create significant challenges and often result in catastrophic loss for agricultural producers, especially for those raising livestock, row crops and vulnerable crops like citrus. Despite every attempt to mitigate risk, your operation may suffer losses. As you prepare for the potential impacts of upcoming winter weather, know that USDA offers several programs to help with recovery.

Risk Management

For producers who have risk protection through [Federal Crop Insurance](#) or the [Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program](#) (NAP), we want to remind you to report crop damage to your crop insurance agent or the local [Farm Service Agency](#) (FSA) office.

If you have crop insurance, contact your agency within 72 hours of discovering damage and be sure to follow up in writing within 15 days. If you have NAP coverage, file a Notice of Loss (also called Form CCC-576) within 15 days of loss becoming apparent, except for hand-harvested crops, which should be reported within 72 hours.

Disaster Assistance

USDA also offers disaster assistance programs, which are especially important to livestock, fruit and vegetable, specialty and perennial crop producers.

First, the [Livestock Indemnity Program](#) (LIP) and [Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybee and Farm-raised Fish Program](#) (ELAP) reimburses producers for a portion of the value of livestock, poultry and other animals that died as a result of a qualifying natural disaster event— like these winter storms – or for loss of grazing acres, feed and forage. To participate in LIP and ELAP, you will need to file a Notice of Loss by the annual program payment application date. The LIP payment application and notice of loss deadline is Feb. 29, 2024, for the 2023 program year and March 3, 2025, for 2024 program year losses. For ELAP, producers are required to complete and submit a notice of loss to their local FSA office no later than the annual program application deadline of January 30 following the program year in which the loss occurred.

Next, the [Tree Assistance Program](#) (TAP) provides cost share assistance to rehabilitate and replant tree, vines or shrubs loss experienced by orchards and nurseries. This complements NAP or crop insurance coverage, which covers the crop but not the plants or trees in all cases.

For TAP, you will need to file a program application within 90 days of the disaster event or the date when the loss of the trees, bushes, or vines is apparent.

Documentation

It's critical to keep accurate records to document all losses following devastating cold weather events. Livestock producers are advised to document beginning livestock numbers by taking time and date-stamped video or pictures prior to and after the loss. Additionally with livestock losses, producers will need to document losses that are due to normal mortality.

Other common documentation options include:

- Purchase records
- Production records
- Vaccination records
- Bank or other loan documents
- Third-party certification

Other Programs

The [Emergency Conservation Program](#) and [Emergency Forest Restoration Program](#) can assist landowners and forest stewards with financial and technical assistance to restore fencing, damaged farmland or forests, and remove snow from feed stocks, water supplies, and feeding areas.

Additionally, FSA offers a variety of loans available including emergency loans that are triggered by disaster declarations and operating loans that can assist producers with credit needs. You can use these loans to replace essential property, purchase inputs like livestock, equipment, feed and seed, or refinance farm-related debts, and other needs. Additionally, FSA offers several loan servicing options available for borrowers who are unable to make scheduled payments on their farm loan programs debt to the agency because of reasons beyond their control.

Meanwhile, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides financial resources through its [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) to help with immediate needs and long-term support to help recover from natural disasters and conserve water resources. Assistance may also be available for emergency animal mortality disposal from natural disasters and other causes.

Additional Resources

Additional details – including payment calculations – can be found on our [NAP](#), [ELAP](#), [LIP](#), and [TAP](#) fact sheets. On farmers.gov, the [Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool](#), [Disaster-at-a-Glance fact sheet](#), and [Farm Loan Assistance Tool](#) can help you determine program or loan options.

While we never want to have to implement disaster programs, we are here to help. To inquire about available programs, contact your local [USDA Service Center](#).

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Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage Programs Receive 2018 Farm Bill One Year Extension, Farmers Can Now Enroll for the 2024 Crop Year

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that agricultural producers can now enroll in the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) [Agriculture Risk Coverage \(ARC\) and Price Loss Coverage \(PLC\)](#) programs for the 2024 crop year. Producers can enroll and make election changes for the 2024 crop year starting Dec. 18, 2023. The deadline to complete enrollment and any election change is March 15, 2024. [Read the full news release here for more information.](#)

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Reminder: Insurance Linkage Requirements for Payments Received Through the Emergency Relief Program

Producers who received an Emergency Relief Program (ERP) payment need to meet ERP insurance linkage requirements by purchasing crop insurance or Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) coverage at the 60/100 level or higher for the next two available crop years, which will be determined from the date you received an ERP payment and may vary depending on the timing and availability of coverage. The insurance coverage requirement applies to the physical location of the county where the crop was located and for which an ERP payment was issued. The next sales closing date to purchase insurance is **March 15, 2024**.

Contact your crop insurance agent or local FSA county office as soon as possible to ask about coverage options. Producers who do not obtain the applicable coverage by the sales/application closing date will be required to refund the ERP benefits received on the applicable crop, plus interest. To determine which crops are eligible for federal crop insurance or NAP, visit the [RMA website](#).

For more information, contact your local [USDA Service Center](#) or visit fsa.usda.gov.

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Montana USDA Encourages Producers Participating in Conservation Reserve Program to Consider Forest Management Incentive

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is offering financial assistance to agricultural producers and private landowners enrolled in its Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to improve the health of their forests. The Forest Management Incentive, available through USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), can help participants with forest management practices, such as brush management and prescribed burning.

The Forest Management Incentive is available to participants with active CRP contracts with forest cover that are not within two years of expiring. The incentive is a payment to eligible CRP participants who properly completed authorized forest management practice activities to improve the condition of resources, promote forest management and enhance wildlife habitat.

Forest management practices include brush management, herbaceous weed control, prescribed burning, firebreaks, development of early successional habitat and forest stand improvement. Additional information is available in our Forest Management Incentive [fact sheet](#).

Participants can now submit offers for the Forest Management Incentive. Interested producers should contact the FSA at their local [USDA Service Center](#).

The Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (Pub. L. 117-169) and the Further Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024 (Pub. L. 118-22), extended the authority and provided funding for the Forest Management Incentive until 2031.

The Forest Management Incentive was launched in 2020 and is one of the many natural resource conservation options available through CRP. Currently, the Forest Management Incentive has participants in 27 states.

Producers not currently participating in CRP can now submit offers for Continuous CRP. [Learn more](#).

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USDA Invests Approximately \$11.5 Million in Composting and Food Waste Reduction Projects in 23 States, Including Montana

USDA is investing approximately \$11.5 million in 38 cooperative agreements that support innovative, scalable waste management plans to reduce and divert food waste from landfills. This includes three project(s) in Montana. The Composting and Food Waste Reduction (CFWR) cooperative agreements, which are funded by the American Rescue Plan Act, are part of USDA's broad support for urban agriculture. The CFWR program is jointly administered by USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP) and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

[Learn more about the projects.](#)

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USDA Now Accepting Farm Loan Payments Online

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced today that most farm loan borrowers will soon be able to make payments to their direct loans online through the Pay My Loan feature on farmers.gov in early February. Pay My Loan is part of a broader effort by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) to streamline its processes, especially for producers who may have limited time during the planting or harvest seasons to visit a local FSA office; modernize and improve customer service; provide additional customer self-service tools; and expand credit access to assist more producers.

On average, local USDA Service Centers process more than 225,000 farm loan payments each year. Pay My Loan gives most borrowers an online repayment option and relieves them from needing to call, mail, or visit a Service Center to pay their loan installment. Farm loan payments can now be made at the borrower's convenience, on their schedule and outside of FSA office hours.

Pay My Loan also provides time savings for FSA's farm loan employees by minimizing manual payment processing activities. This new service for producers means that farm loan employees will have more time to focus on reviewing and processing new loans or servicing requests.

The Pay My Loan feature can be accessed at farmers.gov/loans. To use the payment feature, producers must establish a USDA customer account and a [USDA Level 2 eAuthentication \("eAuth"\) account or a Login.gov account](#). This initial release only allows individuals with loans to make online payments. For now, borrowers with jointly payable checks will need to continue to make loan payments through their local office.

FSA has a significant initiative underway to streamline and automate the Farm Loan Program customer-facing business process. For the over 26,000 producers who submit a direct loan application annually, FSA has made various improvements including:

- The [Online Loan Application](#), an interactive, guided application that is paperless and provides helpful features including an electronic signature option, the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns, complete a balance sheet, and build a farm operating plan.
- The [Loan Assistance Tool](#) that provides customers with an interactive online, step-by-step guide to identifying the direct loan products that may be a fit for their business needs and to understanding the application process.
- A [simplified direct loan paper application](#), which reduced loan applications by more than half, from 29 pages to 13 pages.

More Information

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov.

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 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).

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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Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) for the Rocky Mountain Region Reminds MT Producers about Youth Program Opportunities

There are three youth program opportunities available to eligible youth participants in Montana. **All three applications have a deadline of Friday, March 29th, 2024, at 11:59 PM (PST).**

Bob Miller Memorial Scholarship: Up to twenty-four (24) recipients will receive a \$2,000 scholarship, receiving \$1,000 in the fall semester and \$1,000 in the spring semester. Preference will be given to full-time, undergraduate students. Part-time or graduate students will be considered after full-time, undergraduate students.

Native Student Summer Internship: IAC, in partnership with NRCS, is recruiting undergraduate, junior college, and community college students or Native individuals seeking experience in Tribal agriculture and natural resources. This is an excellent opportunity for those who are passionate about promoting the regeneration of natural resources and addressing food scarcity within their communities.

Throughout the internship, students will gain an in-depth perspective and innovative understanding of how to effectively inspire conservation on the landscape, healthy eating habits, and food sovereignty. This internship is great for youth who seek opportunities for professional development such as networking with peers and organizations or agencies, traveling, public speaking, and attending career-building workshops.

National Youth Advisory Council: IAC's National Youth Advisory Council (NYAC) serves as the advising body under the IAC Youth Program. NYAC will openly communicate with the Youth Program Director to ensure the needs of youth throughout Indian Country are properly met within the IAC's offered programming.

2024 NYAC applications will be accepted on a rolling basis until positions have been filled. Open Council positions are for the following regions: Alaska, Eastern, Great Lakes, Navajo, Rocky Mountain, Southwest, Southern Plains, and Western. Eligible applicants shall be 18-27 years of age.

Please visit indianag.org/youth for a full list of requirements. If you have any questions, please contact Sunshine Tso at sunshine@indianag.org.

Montana IAC Points of Contact:

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USDA Invests \$3 Million to Provide Risk Management Training to Farmers, Ranchers

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency (RMA) today announced up to \$3 million is available for cooperative agreements to educate underserved, small-scale and organic producers on risk management and climate-smart practices. RMA's [Risk Management Education Partnerships](#) provide funding for organizations, such as nonprofits and land grant universities, to develop training and resources for producers about risk management options like crop insurance.

"This funding is integral to our outreach efforts in communities that historically have not had access to training about risk management options. Our Risk Management Education partnerships are part of USDA's broader efforts to ensure equity and access to programs," said RMA Administrator Marcia Bungler. "As a farmer, I know first-hand that agriculture is a risky business. We want to work with growers and livestock producers to provide them training and resources about risk management options and how to apply them to their farming businesses." [Read the full news release here.](#)

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Highly Erodible Land Provisions Reminder

Title XII of the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended (1985 Farm Bill) outlines the Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and Wetland Conservation (WC) provisions. For those that were farming at the time, you'll remember working with the then Soil Conservation Service (now Natural Resources Conservation Service) to develop and apply approved conservation plans that established minimum residue requirements to comply.

To summarize the requirement of this Act, cropland must be farmed in a manner that keeps erosion at acceptable levels in order to be eligible to participate in USDA program benefits. Commonly utilized programs in Montana include federal crop insurance, disaster assistance, crop price support programs (Agriculture Risk and Price Loss Coverage), Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, emergency conservation programs, Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program, farm loans, Environmental Quality Incentives Program and more.

Fast forward to 2024, nearly forty years later, as generations have changed, many farm managers are not familiar with those requirements or may not realize that they are still in effect.

[Learn more.](#)

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USDA's National Organic Program Supports Mentorship Network for Producers Transitioning to Organic

What is the Transition to Organic Partnership Program?

The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a network assembled by the USDA's National Organic Program to support transitioning and organic producers with mentorship and resources. TOPP is segmented into six regions that span the United States and territories working together to grow the network of organic producers. To learn more about the TOPP program please visit <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/organic-certification/topp>.

The Northwest TOPP region spans Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Idaho, Alaska, and Montana. Focused on providing mentorship, technical assistance, resource navigation, and outreach for transitioning and existing organic producers with the help of our partnerships.

- NW TOPP **farmer-to-farmer mentorship program** connects producers transitioning to organic with a certified organic mentor. Learn directly from an experienced certified organic producer in your area of production, available in person and virtually.
- NW TOPP provides **one-on-one technical assistance** for help with going through the organic certification process, developing an organic system plan (OSP), understanding organic regulations, and answering any certification questions you have. NW TOPP also provides **resource navigation assistance** on national conservation programs for implementing organic practices, and locating publications, research, and online resources.
- NW TOPP offers free **educational events, including workshops, webinars, field days** and more all centered on organic production and certification.

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USDA NASS Notifies Producers of the Agricultural Resource Management Survey

USDA NASS will be conducting the Agricultural Resource Management Phase 3 Survey focused on cost of raising barley and oats during the month of February and March.

NASS is publishing 2022 Census of Agriculture data February 13 at 10 am MDT. The Census of Agriculture is the most comprehensive source of Agricultural data. Over 30,000 Montana producers received the Census and were asked about their operation. This is their story and the story of Montana Agriculture. The data from the Census of Agriculture will be the base data for many USDA programs and grants.

Thank you, producers, for taking the time to share your story. To find results of NASS surveys please visit https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/Montana/index.php

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Eric Sommer State Statistician, Montana at 1-800-392-3202.

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USFS Reminds Producers of How 2024 Proves Effective for Prescribed Burning on the Custer Gallatin National Forest

It is worth noting that prescribed burning has proven to be an effective measure for both restoration and fuels reduction projects on Custer Gallatin National Forest this year. This success can be attributed to several factors, including the lower levels of snow, which enabled fire staff to access and burn more piles than usual, as well as the support received from other agencies in carrying out the burn operations. Furthermore, the dry weather experienced during fall facilitated the effective consumption of fuels. As a result, the forest has been able to burn approximately 2,500 acres just this year providing a potential head start on the forest's controlled burning goals.

"The more fire we have on the landscape, both pile burning and broadcast burning, as well as managed wildfire, the more resilient our forests become," said James Pummel, Fire Management Specialist at the Custer Gallatin. "We get an advantage in protecting our communities and wildlife."

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FSA Policy Reminders: [2024 Annual Notification to FSA Customers](#)

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Contact information for your local office, visit: www.farmers.gov.

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