Understanding the U.S. Drought Monitor

Are drought conditions affecting your agricultural operation? The U.S. Drought Monitor (USDM) is a resource producers can use to help determine how to best respond and react to a drought as it develops or lingers.

The USDM is an online, weekly map showing the location, extent, and severity of drought across the United States. It categorizes the entire country as being in one of six levels of drought. The map is released on Thursdays and depicts conditions for the week.

The USDM provides producers with the latest information about drought conditions where they live, enabling producers to best respond and react to a drought as it develops or lingers. In some cases, the USDM may help a producer make specific decisions about their operation, such as reducing the stocking rate because forage is not growing. For others, it may provide a convenient big-picture snapshot of broader environmental conditions.

The USDM incorporates varying data – rain, snow, temperature, streamflow, reservoir levels, soil moisture, and more – as well as first-hand information submitted from on-the-ground sources such as photos, descriptions, and experiences. The levels of drought are connected to the frequency of occurrence across several different drought indicators. What makes the USDM unique is that it is not a strictly numeric product. The mapmakers rely on their judgment and a nationwide network of 450-plus experts to interpret conditions for each region. They synthesize their discussion and analysis into a single depiction of drought for the entire country.

USDA uses the Drought Monitor to determine a producer’s eligibility for certain drought assistance programs, like the Livestock Forage Disaster Program and Emergency Haying or Grazing on Conservation Reserve Program acres.

Additionally, the Farm Service Agency uses the Drought Monitor to trigger and “fast track” Secretarial Disaster Designations which then provides producers impacted by drought access to emergency loans that can assist with credit needs.

Learn more about the U.S. Drought Monitor.

USDA Offers Disaster Assistance for Producers Facing Inclement Weather

Severe weather events create significant challenges and often result in catastrophic loss for agricultural producers. Despite every attempt to mitigate risk, your operation may suffer losses. 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 is especially important to livestock, fruit and vegetable, specialty and perennial crop producers who have fewer risk management options.

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 or for loss of grazing acres, feed and forage. And, the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP) provides assistance to producers of grazed forage crop acres that have suffered crop loss due to a qualifying drought. Livestock producers suffering the impacts of drought can also request Emergency Haying and Grazing on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres.

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 cover the crop but not the plants or trees in all cases.

For LIP and ELAP, you will need to file a Notice of Loss for livestock and grazing or feed losses within 30 days and honeybee losses within 15 days. For TAP, you will need to file a program application within 90 days.

**Documentation**

It’s critical to keep accurate records to document all losses following this devastating cold weather event. Livestock producers are advised to document beginning livestock numbers by taking time and date-stamped video or pictures prior to after the loss.

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 damaged farmland or forests.

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.

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 Discovery 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 file a Notice of Loss or to ask questions about available programs, contact your local USDA Service Center. All USDA Service Centers are open for business, including those that restrict in-person visits or require appointments because of the pandemic.

Manage Your USDA Business Online, Conservation Client Gateway Retiring

USDA published its final rule on determining whether land is considered highly erodible or a wetland, integrating input from the public and making updates in accordance with the 2018 Farm Bill. This final rule follows a focused effort by USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve consistency and use of science in making determinations.

To be eligible for most USDA programs, producers must be conservation compliant with the highly erodible land and wetland provisions. These provisions aim to reduce soil loss on erosion-prone lands and to protect wetlands for the multiple benefits they provide.

The final rule was made available for public inspection today, and it will be published tomorrow in the Federal Register. This follows an interim final rule published Dec. 7, 2018.

This final rule confirms most of the changes made by the December 2018 interim final rule and makes these additional updates:

1. Adding the requirement of the 2018 Farm Bill that USDA will make a reasonable effort to include the affected person in an on-site investigation conducted prior to making a wetland violation technical determination.

2. Further clarifying how wetland hydrology is identified for farmed wetlands and farmed wetland pasture.

3. Adding clarification to the consideration of best-drained condition for wetland hydrology in keeping with the definition of prior converted cropland.

4. Relocating the provision that wetland determinations can be done on a tract, field, or sub-field basis in order to improve clarity.

NRCS has recently updated its conservation compliance webpages, adding highly erodible land and wetland determination resources for agricultural producers by state. Learn more about conservation compliance on the NRCS website

Conservation Efforts Continue on America’s Farms, Ranches Amid Challenging Year

You can now manage your conservation activities and request assistance from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) by logging into your farmers.gov account. These conservation features join several others already available through the farmers.gov portal, including the ability to view farm loan information. As more content and capabilities are added, farmers.gov is quickly becoming the online hub for producers to find resources, submit applications, and request assistance.
Previously, self-service conservation activities were available through Conservation Client Gateway, but that portal was retired on Oct. 15.

But those functionalities are now available through farmers.gov. It was designed and built with the valuable input of USDA customers like you and ready to use for your conservation needs.

Through farmers.gov, you can:

- View, upload, download and e-sign documents;
- Request conservation assistance;
- Request financial assistance, including submitting a program application;
- View and request application details;
- Reference technical terms and submit questions;
- Access information on current and past conservation practices;
- Report practice completion and request practice certification;
- View detailed information on all previous and ongoing contracts, including the amount of cost share assistance received and anticipated; and
- Have authority for FSA and NRCS customers to work in the portal and act on behalf of their active power-of-attorney entitlements and their current authorities for business entities.

Current Conservation Client Gateway Users

If you are a current Conservation Client Gateway user, your information and data will continue to be available through farmers.gov. To access your information, visit farmers.gov and sign into the site’s authenticated portal via the “Sign In / Sign Up” link at the top right of the website. You’ll sign in using your existing CCG account login information.

New Farmers.gov Users

If you do not have login information for farmers.gov, you can create your login profile, or eAuthentication by following the instructions at farmers.gov/sign-in

Help and Support The Conservation Features User Guide gives you step-by-step instructions on how to navigate farmers.gov and the how-to video instructions explain some of the popular features. If you need additional help, personal assistance is available at the farmers.gov Service Desk by selecting the “Help” link located at the top of the all authenticated portal pages and submitting a “Contact Us” request. NRCS field office staff are always available to assist you with your conservation questions and other needs.

FSA Implements Set-Aside Loan Provision for Customers Impacted by COVID-19 Set-Aside Delays Loan Payments for Borrowers

USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) will broaden the use of the Disaster Set-Aside (DSA) loan provision, normally used in the wake of natural disasters, to allow farmers with USDA farm loans who are affected by COVID-19, and are determined eligible, to have their next payment set aside. In some cases, FSA may also set aside a second payment for farmers who have already had one payment set aside because of a prior designated disaster.

FSA direct loan borrowers will receive a letter with the details of the expanded Disaster Set-Aside authorities, which includes the possible set-aside of annual operating loans, as well as explanations of the additional loan servicing options that are available. To discuss or request a loan payment Set-Aside, borrowers should call or email the farm loan staff at their local FSA county office.

The set-aside payment’s due date is moved to the final maturity date of the loan or extended up to twelve months in the case of an annual operating loan. Any principal set-aside will continue to accrue interest until it is repaid. This aims to improve the borrower’s cashflow in the current production cycle.
FSA previously announced it was relaxing the loan-making process and adding flexibilities for servicing direct and guaranteed loans to provide credit to producers in need. Direct loan applicants and borrowers are encouraged to contact their local FSA county office to discuss loan making and servicing flexibilities and other needs or concerns. Customers participating in FSA’s guaranteed loan programs are encouraged to contact their lender. Information on these flexibilities, and office contact information, can be found on farmers.gov/coronavirus.

FSA will be accepting most forms and applications by facsimile or electronic signature. Some services are also available online to customers with an eAuth account, which provides access to the farmers.gov portal where producers can view USDA farm loan information and certain program applications and payments. Customers can track payments, report completed practices, request conservation assistance and electronically sign documents. Customers who do not already have an eAuth account can enroll at farmers.gov/sign-in.

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Next County Committee Meeting: TBD