U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Natrona County USDA Service Center Bulletin - March 30, 2022

Farm Service Agency | Natural Resources Conservation Service | Risk Management Agency

USDA Encourages Producers to Enroll in Grasslands CRP

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) encourages producers and landowners to enroll in the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) starting next week through May 13, 2022. Grassland CRP provides a unique opportunity for farmers, ranchers, and agricultural landowners to keep land in agricultural production and supplement their income while improving their soils and permanent grass cover. The program had its highest enrollment in history in 2021 and is part of the Biden-Harris Administration's broader effort to equip producers with the tools they need to help address climate change and invest in the long-term health of our natural resources.

Grassland CRP is a federally funded voluntary working lands program. Through the program, USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides annual rental payments to landowners to maintain and conserve grasslands while allowing producers to graze, hay, and produce seed on that land. Maintaining the existing permanent cover provides several benefits, including reducing erosion, providing wildlife habitat and migration corridors, and capturing and maintaining carbon in the soil and cover.

FSA provides participants with annual rental payments and cost-share assistance. The annual rental rate varies by county with a national minimum rental rate of $13 per acre for this signup. Contract duration is 10 or 15 years.

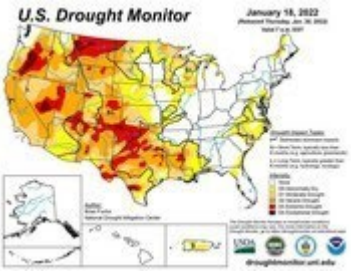
Broadening Reach of Program
As part of the Agency's Justice40 efforts, producers and landowners who are historically underserved, including beginning farmers and military veterans, will receive 10 additional ranking points to enhance their offers.

Additionally, USDA is working to broaden the scope and reach of Grassland CRP by leveraging the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) to engage historically underserved communities. CREP is a partnership program that enables states, Tribal governments, non-profit, and private entities to partner with FSA to implement CRP practices and address high priority conservation and environmental objectives. Interested entities are encouraged to contact FSA.

- Signup for Grassland CRP runs **from April 4 to May 13**.
- Grassland CRP plays a vital role in helping grasslands sequester an incredible amount of carbon, while also providing good wildlife habitat and grazing opportunities for producers and landowners.
- Climate change is happening, and America's rural communities are on the frontlines. This is the time for agriculture, forestry, and rural communities to act. Together we can lead the way with investments in science and research and climate smart solutions that improve the profitability and resilience of producers, improve forest health, while creating new income opportunities, and building wealth that stays in rural communities.
- Grassland CRP helps producers and landowners protect grassland while enabling haying or grazing activities to continue. Lands enrolled support haying and grazing operations and promote plant and animal biodiversity. Lands are also protected from being developed.
- Improvements made in 2021 include:

- the new 5-percent Climate-Smart Practice incentive
- the establishment of two new Grassland CRP National Priority Zones that provided an additional $5 per acre when at least 50 percent of the offer was located within the priority zone
- Enrollment in 2021 in Grassland CRP was popular also because producers could enhance their offer to participate by choosing a 15-year contract option. In 2022, FSA is committed to building on the success of the 2021 signup.
- Our staff helped us navigate a very challenging sign-up period, with little-to-no disruption in the producers' process… A true testament to the commitment our staff have to the mission, their producers, and their community.
- For the upcoming signup, landowners and producers interested in Grassland CRP should contact their local USDA Service Centerto learn more or to apply for the program before the **May 13 deadline.**
- Most CRP programs have distinct and separate signup periods. Signup for Grassland CRP runs **from April 4 to May 13**
- This year, FSA has established a $13/acre Grassland CRP minimum rental rate. The agency remains committed to establishing a minimum rental rate that represents a careful balance between the application of NASS data and direct feedback from impacted local communities.
- FSA will also be expanding its National Grassland Priority Zone in the West to include seven additional counties. This will benefit local- and state-led efforts such as the Executive Order issued by the Governor of Wyoming in February 2020 directed the protection of a big-game animal migration corridor associated with Wyoming mule deer and antelope. FSA will add key counties across Montana, Wyoming, and Utah to the National Priority Zone. to help promote the protection of this wildlife migration corridor,
- Additionally, in line with USDA's Justice40 Initiative, FSA will increase the Grassland CRP F2 ranking factor for historically underserved producers from 10 points to 20 points when at least 50% of the producers on an offer qualify as historically underserved. At the current 10 points, the F2 factor is 5% of the maximum points, whereas increasing the F2 factor to 20 points would be 10% of the maximum points available.

Five Facts About the United States Drought Monitor



This is likely no surprise to you, but drought persists across the western U.S. and is intensifying in some areas. No geographic area is immune to the potential of drought at any given time. The U.S. Drought Monitor provides a weekly drought assessment, and it plays an important role in USDA programs that help farmers and ranchers recover from drought.

Fact #1 - Numerous agencies use the Drought Monitor to inform drought-related decisions.
The map identifies areas of drought and labels them by intensity on a weekly basis. It categorizes the entire country as being in one of six levels of drought. The first two, None and Abnormally Dry (D0), are not considered to be drought. The next four describe increasing levels of drought: Moderate (D1), Severe (D2), Extreme (D3) and Exceptional (D4).

While many entities consult the Drought Monitor for drought information, drought declarations are made by federal, state and local agencies that may or may not use the Drought Monitor to inform their decisions. Some of the ways USDA uses it 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 and to "fast-track" Secretarial drought disaster designations.

Fact #2 - U.S. Drought Monitor is made with more than precipitation data.
When you think about drought, you probably think about water, or the lack of it. Precipitation plays a major role in the creation of the Drought Monitor, but the map's author considers numerous indicators, including drought impacts and local insight from over 450 expert observers around the country. Authors use several dozen indicators to assess drought, including precipitation, streamflow, reservoir levels, temperature and evaporative demand, soil moisture and vegetation health. Because the drought monitor depicts both short and long-term drought conditions,

the authors must look at data for multiple timeframes. The final map produced each week represents a summary of the story being told by all the pieces of data. To help tell that story, authors don't just look at data. They converse over the course of the map-making week with experts across the country and draw information about drought impacts from media reports and private citizens.

Fact #3 - A real person, using real data, updates the map.
Each week's map author, not a computer, processes and analyzes data to update the drought monitor. The map authors are trained climatologists or meteorologists from the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (the academic partner and website host of the Drought Monitor), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and USDA. The author's job is to do what a computer can't – use their expertise to reconcile the sometimes-conflicting stories told by each stream of data into a single assessment.

Fact #4 - The Drought Monitor provides a current snapshot, not a forecast.
The Drought Monitor is a "snapshot" of conditions observed during the most recent week and builds off the previous week's map. The map is released on Thursdays and depicts conditions based on data for the week that ended the preceding Tuesday. Rain that falls on the Wednesday just before the USDM's release won't be reflected until the next map is published. This provides a consistent, week-to-week product and gives the author a window to assess the data and come up with a final map.

Fact #5 – Your input can be part of the drought-monitoring process.
State climatologists and other trained observers in the drought monitoring network relay on-the-ground information from numerous sources to the US Drought monitor author each week. That can include information that you contribute.

The Drought Monitor serves as a trigger for multiple forms of federal disaster relief for agricultural producers, and sometimes producers contact the author to suggest that drought conditions in their area are worse than what the latest drought monitor shows. When the author gets a call like that, it prompts them to look closely at all available data for that area, to see whether measurements of precipitation, temperature, soil moisture and other indicators corroborate producer-submitted reports. This is the process that authors follow whether they receive one report or one hundred reports, although reports from more points may help state officials and others know where to look for impacts.

There are multiple ways to contribute your observations:

1. **Talk to your state climatologist** - Find the current list at the American Association of State Climatologists website.
2. **Email** - Emails sent to droughtmonitor@unl.edu inform the USDM authors.
3. **Become a CoCoRaHS observer** - Submit drought reports along with daily precipitation observations to the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail & Snow Network.
4. **Submit Condition Monitoring Observer Reports (CMOR)** - go.unl.edu/CMOR.
   For more information, read our *Ask the Expert* blog with a NDMC climatologist or visit farmers.gov/protection-recovery.

No-till Leads to Healthier Soil, Cleaner Water

In the minds of many, a freshly tilled field is picturesque – cleaned and ordered for the next planting. But we've learned from studying soil that heavy tillage isn't good. When soil is heavily tilled, the stalks and leaves remaining from the previous crop are chopped, disturbing the top several inches of soil. This "fluffing" action allows for better seed placement according to some, but soil scientists say not tilling leads to healthier, more drought-resistant soil.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and other groups recommend producers to not till and leave the stalks and leaves, called residue, in place. By not tilling, soil organic matter is enhanced, increasing water infiltration and reducing erosion. No-till is a conservation practice that leaves the crop residue undisturbed from harvest.

Any tillage causes a flush of organic matter decomposition, resulting in loss of soil carbon. Tillage also breaks up soil aggregates, which are important for water infiltration, providing oxygen to plant roots, and reducing erosion.

Healthy soils cycle water and nutrients more efficiently. And they function better, enabling them to buffer against extreme drought and flooding. Plus, they reduce soil loss into waterways, which can cause problems for water quality.

Good management of field residue can increase efficiency of irrigation and control erosion. No-till can be used for many crops in almost any soil and can save producers labor costs and fuel. It's a sound investment for the environment and the farm.

Farmers.gov Feature Helps Producers Find Farm Loans that Fit Their Operation

Farmers and ranchers can use the *Farm Loan Discovery Tool* on farmers.gov to find information on USDA farm loans that may best fit their operations.

USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) offers a variety of loan options to help farmers finance their operations. From buying land to financing the purchase of equipment, FSA loans can help.

USDA conducted field research in eight states, gathering input from farmers and FSA farm loan staff to better understand their needs and challenges.

How the Tool Works
Farmers who are looking for financing options to operate a farm or buy land can answer a few simple questions about what they are looking to fund and how much money they need to borrow. After submitting their answers, farmers will receive information on farm loans that best fit their specific needs. The loan application and additional resources also will be provided.

Farmers can download application quick guides that outline what to expect from preparing an application to receiving a loan decision. There are four guides that cover loans to individuals, entities, and youth, as well as information on microloans. The guides include general eligibility requirements and a list of required forms and documentation for each type of loan. These guides can help farmers prepare before their first USDA service center visit with a loan officer.

Farmers can access the *Farm Loan Discovery Tool* by visiting farmers.gov/fund and clicking the "Start" button. Follow the prompts and answer five simple questions to receive loan information that is applicable to your agricultural operation. 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.

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