

Daily Democrat

USDA Reaching Out to Farms and Ranches Impacted by Drought and Disaster

By Val Dolcini, State Executive Director, USDA Farm Service Agency

A wetter than usual February has helped turn the brown hills of California's coastal ranges and Sierra foothills a light shade of green and while these rangelands won't be mistaken for Ireland any time soon, this precipitation was a welcome relief from weeks of severe drought conditions. Despite this much-needed rainfall, 2013 was one of the driest years in California's history. In fact, some scientists think that we're in the midst of one of the region's driest periods since Sir Francis Drake landed on the California coast in the year 1579! We will need a sustained period of heavy precipitation throughout the remaining spring weeks to mitigate widespread drought-related impacts during the summer months ahead.

These historic drought conditions have affected all of California's farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. Thousands of acres will likely be fallowed throughout California, livestock and dairy herds across the state have been thinned or will be entirely sold off in some cases, municipal water sources are running dangerously low in some rural communities, and farm workers will be unemployed in communities already hard hit by turbulent economic times.

In difficult times like these, whether it's a freeze in the citrus belt, wildfires in the Sierra, unexpected flooding, or in this case, an historic statewide drought, the 'safety net' programs offered by the US Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency can offer a helping hand to affected farmers and ranchers that just might mean the difference between staying in business or closing the barn door for the last time. The men and women of the USDA are working every day with farmers and ranchers all across California to deliver programs, tools, and reliable customer service that will help defray the costs of feed and water for livestock and develop new and permanent water sources for cattle operations. We're reaching out with a wide array of loans from low-interest microloans to emergency loans that can help with daily operating costs and other critical needs. We're working to ensure that the disaster relief payments we make through our various programs are done in a timely and customer-friendly way while still maintaining the highest levels of program integrity. Finally, we're preparing to roll out disaster assistance programs next month that will tackle the needs of California's livestock industry hit hard by a third consecutive year of drought.

These programs, and others contained in the Farm Bill signed by President Obama earlier this year, are a part of a broader commitment that we make to each other as Americans to ensure that the men, women, and farm families who grow our food here in California, and all across our great nation, are protected against the sometimes capricious whims of Mother Nature. The safety net won't make these farming operations whole, but it will provide some hope and encouragement that better days are ahead and that the rain will fall once again.

In the meantime, the US Department of Agriculture stands ready to help all of California's farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers to ensure that in these challenging times, the needs of those who grow and harvest the bounty of our fields is being met.

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