

## **“All Hands on Deck” to Combat Effects of Drought**

By Val Dolcini, State Executive Director

As drought continues to affect most of the country and in our own state, our thoughts and prayers are with the thousands of farm families who have been affected by this disaster.

President Obama has called the U.S. Government’s approach to drought assistance an “all-hands-on-deck effort,” and he has directed USDA and other Federal agencies to find additional ways to help those impacted by drought. To date, USDA has taken a wide variety of administrative action that I want to be sure California farmers and ranchers know about.

First and foremost, USDA streamlined the disaster designation process that has allowed USDA to quickly and efficiently authorize emergency aid for producers, including California, where 21 of our 58 counties have been declared primary disaster areas for drought.

Earlier this summer, USDA also lowered the interest rate for Farm Service Agency emergency loans from 3.75 percent to 2.25 percent and authorized emergency haying and grazing on additional lands enrolled in USDA conservation programs.

Secretary Vilsack personally encouraged crop insurance companies to provide a short grace period for farmers on unpaid insurance premiums – and all of the major crop insurance companies have agreed to do so.

This month USDA announced that it will provide an additional \$30 million nationwide to help producers move emergency water supplies and repair damaged lands. Finally, USDA intends to purchase up to \$170 million in meat, poultry and farm-raised fish to help deliver additional relief for livestock producers.

The President has also convened ongoing meetings of the White House Rural Council to ensure that all Federal agencies are doing everything they can to help. For example, the Small Business Administration has worked to increase emergency lending for small businesses, farmers and ranchers and the Department of Transportation is waiving certain requirements on commercial trucks, to get more drivers on the road in the relief effort.

The biggest challenge that the President faces today in carrying out the relief effort is the fact that the 2008 Farm Bill disaster assistance programs expired at the end of last year. These programs were implemented under President Obama and prior to expiring delivered more than 400,000 disaster assistance payments to U.S. farmers and ranchers, totaling more than \$4 billion.

Our preference remains that drought assistance be enacted as part of a comprehensive, multi-year *Food, Farm and Jobs Bill*, to ensure that USDA has tools to keep growing the rural economy, give more certainty to American farmers and ranchers, and provide help to producers in need.

I encourage any farmer or rancher with questions to contact their local FSA office or to visit USDA’s drought web site – [www.usda.gov/drought](http://www.usda.gov/drought) – for the latest information. As the drought continues, President Obama, Secretary Vilsack and all of us at USDA won’t stop looking for ways to help farmers and ranchers in this difficult time.

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