USDA Assists Farmers, Ranchers and Communities Affected by Catastrophic Texas, Oklahoma Wildfires

News Release | | March 07, 2024

Contact:
FPAC.BC.Press@usda.gov

WASHINGTON, March 7, 2024 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to aid recovery efforts for farmers, ranchers and residents affected by recent wildfires in the Texas panhandle and western Oklahoma. To date, around 1.3 million acres have burned across both states. USDA staff are ready to respond with a variety of program flexibilities and other assistance to agricultural producers and communities in need.

"At USDA, we know all too well the devastation catastrophic wildfires like these can cause to homes, communities and livelihoods," said Secretary Vilsack. "As the fires are contained and damage assessed, know that USDA is working with our state partners to deliver support and assistance to those affected. We will do everything we can to support farmers, ranchers, and impacted communities on the long road to recovery."

Right now, the USDA Forest Service has more than 200 personnel on the ground helping with wildfire suppression. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency have also held informational sessions in the towns of Borger and Canadian, Texas, covering available assistance for impacted ranchers, livestock producers and landowners. Given the scope of the fires, recovery will likely take many months, and USDA plans to host additional informational sessions going forward.

When a natural disaster is designated by the Secretary of Agriculture or a natural disaster or emergency is declared by the president under the Stafford Act, USDA has an emergency loan program that provides eligible farmers low-interest loans to help them recover from production and physical losses. USDA also offers additional programs tailored to the needs of specific agricultural sectors to help producers weather the financial impacts of major disasters and rebuild their operations.

Farm Service Agency programs for affected producers include the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP), which provides assistance for livestock losses due to wildfire in excess of normal mortality, and the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP), which provides compensation for grazing and feed losses, transportation of water and feed to livestock, and hauling livestock to grazing acres. Livestock producers who have suffered grazing losses due to a qualifying drought condition or fire on federally managed land during the normal grazing period for a

county may also qualify for help through USDA's Livestock Forage Disaster Program. Producers of non-insurable crops who suffer crop losses, lower yields or are prevented from planting agricultural commodities may be eligible for assistance under USDA's Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program if the losses were due to natural disasters. Producers who have risk protection through Federal Crop Insurance should provide a notice of loss to their agent within 72 hours of initial discovery of damage and follow up in writing within 15 days.

USDA has authorized policy flexibilities for several key disaster assistance programs, including LIP and ELAP, to aid agricultural producers who have experienced significant livestock, feed, forage, and infrastructure loss from recent wildfires. Flexibilities include reimbursement for feed costs and hauling and accepting additional types of records for death loss documentation.

Helping operations recover after disasters:

USDA has also expanded authorization of emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program acres to support the relocation of livestock for grazing purposes. This includes all counties in Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming.

USDA can provide 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. In Texas, USDA is opening a special sign-up for $6 million in EQIP funding for eligible practices related to wildfire recovery, including emergency animal mortality management and prescribed grazing.

Farmers and ranchers needing to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters can apply for assistance through USDA's Emergency Conservation Program. This program provides assistance to remove debris from farmland, replace watering facilities and repair or replace fences including livestock cross fences, boundary fences, cattle gates or wildlife exclusion fences on agricultural land. Producers can request an advance payment.

USDA also has assistance available for eligible private forest landowners who need to restore forestland damaged by natural disasters through the Emergency Forest Restoration Program.

USDA's Emergency Watershed Protection Program can help relieve imminent threats to life and property caused by flood, fires and other natural disasters that impair a watershed. Visit USDA's Disaster Resource Center to learn more about USDA disaster preparedness and response. For more information on USDA disaster assistance programs, contact your local USDA Service Center or crop insurance agent.

Other USDA Assistance:

USDA Rural Development (RD) stands ready to help people in rural communities who have been impacted by natural disasters. RD offers programs and services to help people repair and rebuild their homes, businesses, infrastructure and more. A resource guide outlines assistance that can help rural residents, businesses and communities in their long-term recovery and planning efforts. Learn more about how RD can support your recovery needs at Rural Development Disaster Assistance | Rural Development (usda.gov).

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.

Farm Service Agency:

1400 Independence Ave.
SW Washington, DC 20250

Contact:

FPAC Press Desk
FPAC.BC.Press@usda.gov