

# USDA Declares Disaster in 597 Counties Due to Drought

WASHINGTON (USDA) — Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today designated 597 counties in 14 states as primary natural disaster areas due to drought and heat, making all qualified farm operators in the areas eligible for low-interest emergency loans. These are the first disaster designations made by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2013.

"As drought persists, USDA will continue to partner with producers to see them through longer-term recovery, while taking the swift actions needed to help farmers and ranchers prepare their land and operations for the upcoming planting season," said Vilsack. "I will also continue to work with Congress to encourage passage of a Food, Farm and Jobs bill that gives rural America the long-term certainty they need, including a strong and defensible safety net."

The 597 counties have shown a drought intensity value of at least D2 (Drought Severe) for eight consecutive weeks based on [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) [1] measurements, providing for an automatic designation. The Drought Monitor is produced in partnership by USDA, the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It helps USDA determine county disaster designations due to drought. The Drought Monitor measures drought intensity on a scale from D1 to D4, as follows:

D1: Moderate Drought

D2: Severe Drought

D3: Extreme Drought

D4: Exceptional Drought

In 2012, USDA designated 2,245 counties in 39 states as disaster areas due to drought, or 71 percent of the United States. At the height of the 2012 drought, the Secretary announced a series of aggressive USDA actions to get help to farmers, ranchers and businesses impacted by the 2012 drought, including lowering the interest rate for emergency loans, working with crop insurance companies to provide flexibility to farmers, and expanding the use of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres for haying and grazing, which opened 2.8 million acres and brought nearly \$200 million in forage for all livestock producers during a critical period. Many of those same actions continue to bring relief to producers ahead of the 2013 planting season, including:

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- Simplified the Secretarial disaster designation process and reduced the time it takes to designate counties affected by disasters by 40 percent.
- Transferred \$14 million in unobligated program funds into the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) to help farmers and ranchers rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out emergency water conservation measures.
- Updated the emergency loans application process to allow these loans to be made earlier in the season.
- Filed special provisions with the federal crop insurance program to allow haying or grazing of cover crops without impacting the insurability of planted 2013 spring crops.
- Authorized up to \$5 million in grants to evaluate and demonstrate agricultural practices that help farmers and ranchers adapt to drought.
- Authorized \$16 million in existing funds from its Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to target states experiencing exceptional and extreme drought.
- Installed conservation systems that impacted more than 1 million producers, and reduced water withdrawn from the Ogallala Aquifer by at least 860,000 acre feet, equivalent to the domestic water use of approximately 9.6 million individuals for a year.
- Worked with crop insurance companies to provide flexibility on premium payments to farmers, and one-third of all policyholders took advantage of the payment period.
- Partnered with local governments, colleges, state and federal partners to conduct a series of regional drought workshops with hundreds of producers in Nebraska, Colorado, Arkansas, and Ohio.

A natural disaster designation makes all qualified farm operators in the designated areas eligible for low interest emergency loans. During times of need, USDA has historically responded to disasters across the country by providing direct support, disaster assistance, technical assistance, and access to credit. USDA's low-interest emergency loans have helped producers recover from losses due to drought, flooding and other natural disasters for decades. The interest rate on emergency loans currently stands at 2.15 percent, providing a competitive, much-needed resource for producers hoping to recover from production and physical losses associated with natural disasters.

The Obama Administration, with Agriculture Secretary Vilsack's leadership, has worked tirelessly to strengthen rural America, maintain a strong farm safety net, and create opportunities for America's farmers and ranchers. U.S. agriculture is currently experiencing one of its most productive periods in American history thanks to the productivity, resiliency, and resourcefulness of our producers. A strong farm safety net is important to sustain the success of American agriculture. USDA's crop insurance program currently insures 264 million acres, 1.14 million policies, and \$110 billion worth of liability on about 500,000 farms. In response to tighter financial markets, USDA has expanded the availability of farm credit, helping struggling farmers refinance loans. Since 2009, USDA has provided more than 128,000 loans to family farmers totaling more than \$18 billion. Over 50 percent of the loans went to beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers.

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Visit [www.usda.gov/drought](http://www.usda.gov/drought) [2] for the latest information regarding USDA's drought response and assistance.

The 597 primary counties designated as disaster areas today correspond to the following states: Alabama, 14; Arkansas, 47; Arizona, 4; Colorado, 30; Georgia, 92; Hawaii, 2; Kansas, 88; Oklahoma, 76; Missouri, 31; New Mexico, 19; Nevada, 9; South Carolina, 11; Texas, 157; and Utah, 17. For more information about the specific state designations, visit the Farm Service Agency's [disaster designations page](#) [3].

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/>

[2] <http://www.usda.gov/drought>

[3] [http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=land ing&topic=edn&newstype=ednewsrel](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/newsReleases?area=newsroom&subject=land%20ing&topic=edn&newstype=ednewsrel)