

By Secretary TOM VILSACK
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This week, we continued to see historic levels of drought grip much of our nation, impacting thousands of farm families. Although the hard work and innovation of our producers has fueled a strong farm economy in recent years, President Obama and I understand the major challenges this drought poses for American agriculture.

As of July 20, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has designated 1,055 counties across the country as disaster areas due to drought. Significant portions of many crops are impacted – for example, according to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor report, 88 percent of our nation's corn and 87 percent of our soybeans are in drought-stricken areas. Rising grain prices are threatening livestock and dairy operators with high input costs.

Our farmers and ranchers are no strangers to uncertainty – but it's even harder to plan for the future when we don't know how much more severe the drought will be.

Over the years, American producers have constantly innovated to meet new demands and adapt to new conditions, embracing new methods and utilizing new technology. The same innovative spirit that has positioned American agriculture as a global leader has helped to reduce the impact of the drought.

Nevertheless, the uncertainty of drought means this is a very difficult time for many. At President Obama's direction, USDA is doing all it can within the Department's existing authority to help.

Last week, I announced a final rule to simplify the process for Secretarial disaster designations – both to speed the process for producers and to reduce the burden on State government officials, who are also hard at work to help producers around the country cope with this disaster.

Means to help producers impacted by drought

Wednesday, July 25, 2012

I reduced the interest rate for Farm Service Agency Emergency Loans, effectively lowering the current rate from 3.75 percent to 2.25 percent to help ensure that credit is available for farm families who are hit by drought.

And finally, I announced that USDA has lowered payment reductions for Conservation Reserve Program lands that qualify for emergency haying and grazing in 2012, from 25 to 10 percent.

USDA officials are traveling to states around the country to see firsthand the impact of the drought, and we will continue to look for ways to help. But the fact is USDA's legal authority to provide assistance remains limited right now. That's because the 2008 Farm Bill disaster programs, which were implemented under President Obama, expired last year. Prior to the expiration, these programs helped hundreds of thousands of U.S. producers during disasters.

If Congress doesn't act, USDA will remain limited in our means to help drought-stricken producers. That's why President Obama and I continue to call on Congress to take steps to ensure that USDA has the tools it needs to help farm families during the drought. Disaster assistance for producers is also one of many reasons why we need swift action by Congress to pass a Food, Farm and Jobs Bill this year.

I know that many producers are struggling today with the impact of this historic drought. The President and I are committed to doing all we can to help farmers and ranchers in this difficult time.

As all of us across America hope for rainfall, and while USDA does all it can to assist America's farmers, ranchers and rural communities, I hope that Congress will do all it can to help us get the job done.