



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

OCT 9 2015

The Honorable Pedro Pierluisi
U.S. House of Representatives
2410 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Resident Commissioner Pierluisi:

Thank you for your letter of June 8, 2015, requesting a Secretarial disaster designation for municipalities in Puerto Rico and disaster assistance for producers suffering losses as a result of prolonged drought conditions. I apologize for the delayed response.

As of July 15, 2015, I designated six municipalities in Puerto Rico as primary natural disaster areas due to recent drought conditions. On September 2, 2015, we added 17 more municipalities to the list. You may find a complete list of counties named as primary and contiguous disaster areas at <http://disaster.fsa.usda.gov>.

A Secretarial disaster designation makes farm operators in primary counties and those counties contiguous to such counties eligible for emergency loan assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA), provided the eligibility requirements are met under 7 CFR Section 764.352. Farmers in eligible counties have 8 months from the date of a Secretarial disaster designation to apply for emergency loan assistance. FSA will consider each emergency loan application on its own merits, taking into account the extent of production losses, security available, and repayment ability.

The following disaster assistance programs are available and do not require a Secretarial disaster designation for producers to qualify. These disaster programs can help farmers and ranchers recover from losses caused by natural disasters. FSA administers the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP); Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP); Livestock Forage Disaster Assistance Program (LFP); Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish Program (ELAP); and Tree Assistance Program (TAP). To be eligible for disaster assistance programs under the 2014 Farm Bill, producers are no longer required to purchase crop insurance or the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program coverage, which was the risk management purchase mandate under the 2008 Farm Bill.

The ECP provides emergency funding and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out emergency water conservation measures in periods of severe drought. The ECP is administered by State and county FSA committees. Subject to availability of funds, locally elected county committees are authorized to implement ECP.

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The LIP and LFP provide payments to eligible producers for livestock deaths and grazing losses, respectively, which have occurred from October 1, 2011, to the present. The ELAP provides emergency assistance to eligible producers of livestock, honeybees, and farm-raised fish for losses due to disease, adverse weather, or other conditions, such as blizzards and wildfires, not covered by LFP and LIP. The TAP provides financial assistance to qualifying orchardists and nursery tree growers to replant or rehabilitate trees, bushes, and vines damaged by natural disasters.

Producers interested in signing up for any of the disaster assistance programs or applying for emergency loan assistance are encouraged to contact their local FSA office for information on the types of records needed and to schedule an appointment. Taking these steps in advance will help producers ensure their applications move through the process as quickly as possible. Additional information on these programs is available on the FSA Web site at www.disaster.fsa.usda.gov. Local county offices can be found by visiting <http://offices.usda.gov>.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been proactive in its efforts to assist agricultural producers in Puerto Rico address the current drought conditions. Just this year, the NRCS has allocated over \$4 million in financial assistance offered through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Nearly half of this funding is focused on addressing resource concerns that will help mitigate drought impacts. For example, NRCS has prioritized funding for livestock that addresses inadequate water and includes firebreaks to help reduce risks from wildfires. The NRCS also prioritizes funding for projects that help reduce aquifer overdraft and address inefficient irrigation systems. Through the adoption of conservation practices, agricultural producers are able to better manage and more effectively utilize the limited amount of available water during drought conditions.

Again, thank you for writing and for your interest in USDA assistance to help producers in Puerto Rico.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary