

# USDA Announces \$308M For Disaster-Stricken States

BY BILL DRAPER  
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The U.S. Department of Agriculture is adding more than \$300 million to the massive amount of financial assistance federal agencies have doled out in response to an unusually intense year of natural disasters, officials announced Wednesday.

The money, from three emergency funds administered by the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency, is more than double the \$136.6 million paid from the funds a year ago. It will go toward repairing farmland and associated property damaged by flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes and wildfires.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said natural disasters impacted 55 million acres of farmland nationwide in 2011.

"There have been years that have had more intensive damage in a particular geographic area, but what's unique about last year is that virtually every part of the country was affected," Vilsack said.

The most aid is headed to Utah and Missouri, which combined will take in more than \$110 million, or more than one-third of the total announced Wednesday.

States rely on local conservation and farm service offices to approve fund applications, which are then forwarded on to the national USDA offices. Vilsack spokesman Matt Herrick said each state largely received the money it requested.



Vilsack

Utah asked for \$60 million to deal with two rounds of flooding, including in the southern part of the state in December 2010 and spring flooding that inundated farmers in northern and central Utah following a record snowpack, said Bronson Smart, state conservation engineer for the conservation service.

Smart said state and county officials had received tens of millions of dollars from the conservation service to fund dozens of projects following similar flooding disasters in 2005, and have since learned the value of seeking help from the emergency funds.

"Our counties and cities have come to rely on us quite a bit," Smart said. After the 2005 flooding, "we spent \$80 or \$90 million ... People saw that these were good investments."

Missouri suffered months of flooding along the Missouri River after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers authorized unprecedented releases from reservoirs in the northern river basin all summer to deal with unexpectedly heavy rain in May and above-average mountain snowpack. Farmers in the Missouri Bootheel, meanwhile, saw their crops swamped when the Army Corps of Engineers exploded a levee to relieve water pressure on an upriver town in Illinois. The intentional breach sent water cascading

over thousands of acres of prime farmland.

Missouri will receive around \$50 million, of which \$35 million will come from the watershed program and the rest from the conservation fund. That's in addition to millions of dollars Missouri already has received in aid from such agencies as the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Corps of Engineers.

Harold Decker, assistant state conservationist for water resources in Missouri, said most of the watershed money will go toward clearing and redeveloping drainage ditches filled with silt and debris by flooding on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

"Without that work, those systems aren't going to function," Decker said. "If ditches aren't draining properly, it retards plant growth and the drainage of the plants and lowers production."

Slightly more than \$215 million of the total aid announced Wednesday comes from the Emergency Watershed Program, about \$80 million will come from the Emergency Conservation Program and nearly \$12 million is from the FSA's Emergency Forest Restoration Program.

The money is distributed based on local agencies' applications and ability to pay 25 percent of the cost of requested projects, according to the USDA. Paying the balance could prove to be the difficult part for hard-hit communities already struggling to recover from disasters and the economic downturn.

In New York, which is set to receive \$41.8 million — including

about \$37.8 million in watershed funds — money is earmarked for repairing erosion and other damage left behind by back-to-back late summer tropical storms Irene and Lee.

Dennis DeWeese, acting state conservationist with the conservation service in New York, said 51 communities have asked for assistance and damage assessments have been completed for 15. The agency's staff of 25, mostly engineers, had visited 160 sites by the end of last week and is continuing work that may extend into the Adirondacks.

But he said it will be difficult to ask already cash-strapped towns and villages to pay their share.

"A lot of these municipalities are overwhelmed," DeWeese said.

In addition to flooding, 2011 was a big year for tornadoes, including record outbreaks in the South and a monster storm that leveled a large portion of Joplin, Mo.

Alabama is scheduled to get just more than \$6 million in assistance for tornado recovery, followed by nearly \$2.1 million in

Georgia.

Alabama's allocation is due in large part to losses in the poultry industry, said state deputy commissioner of agriculture Brett Hall. Chickens died when their houses blew away or during of power outages following the storms, he said.

Vilsack said the emergency money is being used to help agricultural interests beyond what is covered by crop insurance. He said the USDA paid out \$8.6 billion in crop insurance payments last year, and \$17.2 billion over the past three years.

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## Leg. Panel Hears Neb. Child Welfare Bill

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — A legislative panel would keep tracking Nebraska's child welfare reform efforts through at least 2014 and report annually on the progress made, under a bill heard Wednesday in the Legislature.

The Health and Human Service Committee heard the proposal by Omaha Sen. Gwen Howard that would require annual committee reports to the Legislature, the governor and the chief justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court.

Howard said the measure would continue the work of an interim study of the state's child services, most of which are provided by the Department of Health and Human Services.

"I've always believed it is impossible to create policy in an information vacuum," she said. "If we lack accurate and timely information, it is impossible to know whether an agency is operating effectively and efficiently."

Critics say the state's child welfare services have grown too costly, lacked transparency and failed to meet the needs of many children with behavioral and mental health problems.

Child welfare reform has emerged as one of the largest issues the state's one-house Legislature faces this session following the release last month of a legislative report that recommended a return to state-run case management services. The report also called for the creation of a new state Department of Children's Services and a commission that would examine the alleged problems with the current system.

The report reflected complaints aired during months of legislative hearings on child welfare throughout Nebraska: unmanageable workloads and high turnover among case workers, poor training and communication, a lack of oversight, inflated costs and few signs

of improvement.

The privatization effort began when the division signed contracts with five lead agencies to offer and coordinate child services statewide. Three of the five providers have dropped out, citing financial shortfalls, which forced the state and the remaining lead agencies to take over their cases.

Omaha Sen. Bob Krist introduced a bill Tuesday that would eliminate the state's Foster Care Review Board, which oversees foster child services throughout the state, and shift power to local boards. The head of the state foster care service office would report directly to the Legislature if the bill becomes law.

Krist said the local board would be more responsive to the needs of the state's urban and rural communities.

## County

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being put together and a number of machine storage buildings," Commissioner Allen Sinclair said. "There are some nice buildings being put up in the country."

Garrity said signs point to 2012 being another good year.

"The way the land requests are coming in and the general feel of it out there looks like another very good year," he stated.

Commission Chairman Bruce Jensen was absent from Wednesday's meeting.

In other business Wednesday, the commission:

- set Feb. 7 as the date that it will hold a first reading of a proposed drainage ordinance created by a task force it appointed. Two public meetings were held to gather public input on the law, and the task force feels the ordinance is ready to be considered by the commission;

- approved approximately \$14,000 for the Volin Fire Association to purchase equipment. However, commissioners said the association needs to begin the process of establishing a district with taxation powers in order to properly fund its operations in the future;

- approved approximately \$7,400 for Lesterville Fire and Rescue;

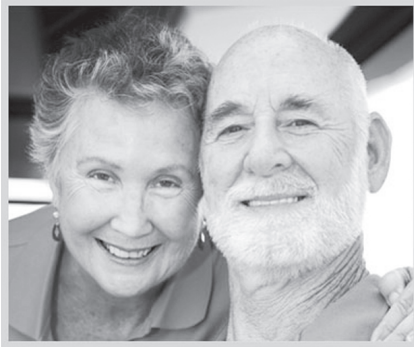
- was informed by Steve Mietz, superintendent of the Missouri National Recreational River, of plans to hold public meetings in the area about an effort by the National Park Service to buy easements for land protection in the region. Commissioner Garry Moore strongly suggested that Yankton be added to the list of locations where a meeting will be held;

- approved an agreement with Sanford Health for ground ambulance services; and

- approved a \$1,200 expenditure for a projector to be mounted in the commission chambers.

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- 2 — Bring your child's certified birth certificate and all completed registration forms to Beadle Elementary School for the district-wide Jr. Kindergarten/ Kindergarten Registration Night on Thursday, February 9 from 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
- 3 — Make your Jr. Kindergarten/Kindergarten Screening appointment on Registration Night. Screening will be held on May 1 & 2 at the Yankton Community Library.

For more information contact:

Beadle School.....665-2282  
Lincoln School.....665-7392  
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