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## A Message from the Weston County Executive Director

JANUARY



Winter made its mark this month, and we hope everyone stayed warm and safe during the recent cold spell. Personally, I was very grateful for the warmth of our wood stove after tending to our herds outside.

As we dive into January, our office is buzzing with activity, wrapping up 2023 activities and gearing up for 2024. Here are some important FSA updates and deadlines that are on the immediate horizon:

If you had livestock losses or other impacts due to the recent extreme weather, or if you experience any weather-related losses in the coming winter months, contact our office promptly to review available programs that may help mitigate losses and to discuss any required program documentation.

For those who experienced livestock losses due to extreme weather in 2023, you may still be eligible for our [2023 Livestock Indemnity Program](#). Reach out to us for details. The deadline to report losses and apply for payment is **Thursday, February 29, 2024**. This deadline also applies to the folks who reported losses in 2023 but have not completed an application for payment yet.

The [Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage \(ARC/PLC\)](#) programs are vital farm bill safety net tools for producers with cropland. The 2018 Farm Bill has been extended, authorizing ARC/PLC for 2024. You can elect coverage and enroll in ARC-County or PLC on a crop-by-crop basis on farms with assigned base acres. Election changes (your choice between ARC or PLC) are optional, but you must re-enroll to remain eligible for these financial benefits in 2024, unless you signed up for a multi-year contract during the initial 2018 sign-ups. The deadline to make elections and enroll is Friday, **March 15, 2024**. See the article below for more information.

We are working on closing out [2023 Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program \(NAP\)](#) affairs. This includes reporting 2023 harvested production by producers with NAP hay coverage and producers making payments on buy up premiums. We can provide maps for you to record your bale counts and weights on a field-by-field basis. FSA also provides an optional record keeping tool [here](#). Your production is not considered filed until you sign a CCC-452, *NAP Actual Production History and Approved Yield Record*. The deadline to sign your approved yield is **Monday, July 15, 2024**, and buy-up premiums are due **Thursday, February 15, 2024**.

Don't forget about the [Emergency Relief Program \(ERP\) 2022](#). If you received a pre-filled application in the mail, please send it back to us soon. If you haven't received one but had a revenue loss in 2022 due to necessary expenses linked to losses from a qualifying 2022 disaster event, get in touch with us to talk about the program's requirements and if you qualify. FSA has not published a sign-up deadline to date.

Something I recently learned: The USDA Farm Service Agency traces its roots back to 1933, but the organization resembling today's FSA, the Commodity Stabilization Service, wasn't established until 1953 and did not become the more commonly known Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) until 1961. Our grazing associations, Thunder Basin Grazing Association (established 1937) and Inyan Kara Grazing Association (founded 1939), actually predate the FSA as we know it today. Fascinating, isn't it?

If you have any questions or concerns, always know you can reach out to me, my office staff, or our county committee members.

Bye bye and buy bonds. (Bob Hope's WWII Radio Show Sign Off)

Sherie Hilgenkamp  
Weston County Executive Director

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## UPCOMING DEADLINES & IMPORTANT DATES

- **February 2, 2024:** NRCS application deadline to apply to the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).
- **February 2, 2024:** NRCS application deadline to apply to the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).
- **February 15, 2024:** FSA deadline to pay 2023 NAP Buy-Up Premiums.
- **February 19, 2024:** USDA Service Centers closed for federal holiday.
- **February 29, 2024:** FSA application deadline to apply for Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) benefits for 2023 losses.
- **March 4, 2024:** WCNRD application deadline to apply for Conservation Projects Cost-Share Program.
- **March 15, 2024:** FSA deadline to elect program options and enroll in 2024 ARC/PLC.

Also remember the following:

**NAP Notice of Loss** must be filed the earlier of 15 days of the disaster occurrence or when losses become apparent, or 15 days of the final harvest date.

**Leases and/or Land Ownership changes including operational changes** must be reported within 30 calendar days of change to avoid late fees, repayment of funds issued and/or ineligibility for program participation. The deadline to submit changes for the 2024 program year is August 1, 2024.

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## Farmers Can Now Enroll for the Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage Programs the 2024 Crop Year

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) today announced that agricultural producers can now enroll in the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) [Agriculture Risk Coverage \(ARC\) and Price Loss Coverage \(PLC\)](#) programs for the 2024 crop year. Producers can enroll and make election changes for the 2024 crop year starting Dec. 18, 2023. The deadline to complete enrollment and any election change is March 15, 2024.

On Nov. 16, 2023, President Biden signed into law H.R. 6363, the *Further Continuing Appropriations and Other Extensions Act, 2024* (Pub. L. 118-22), which extended the *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018* (Pub. L. 115-

334), more commonly known as the 2018 Farm Bill, through September 30, 2024. This extension allows authorized programs, including ARC and PLC, to continue operating.

## **2024 Elections and Enrollment**

Producers can elect coverage and enroll in ARC-County (ARC-CO) or PLC, which provide crop-by-crop protection, or ARC-Individual (ARC-IC), which protects the entire farm. Although election changes for 2024 are optional, producers must enroll through a signed contract each year. Also, if a producer has a multi-year contract on the farm it will continue for 2024 unless an election change is made.

If producers do not submit their election revision by the March 15, 2024, deadline, their election remains the same as their 2023 election for commodities on the farm. Farm owners cannot enroll in either program unless they have a share interest in the cropland.

Covered commodities include barley, canola, large and small chickpeas, corn, crambe, flaxseed, grain sorghum, lentils, mustard seed, oats, peanuts, dry peas, rapeseed, long grain rice, medium grain rice, safflower seed, seed cotton, sesame, soybeans, sunflower seed and wheat.

## **2022 Crop Year Payments**

This fall, FSA issued payments totaling more than \$267 million to agricultural producers who enrolled in the 2022 ARC-CO option and the ARC ARC-IC option for covered commodities that triggered a payment. Payments through the PLC option did not trigger for the 2022 crop year.

ARC and PLC payments for a given crop year are paid out the following fall to allow actual county yields and the Market Year Average prices to be finalized. These payments help mitigate fluctuations in either revenue or prices for certain crops. Payments for crops that may trigger for the 2023 crop year will be issued in the fall of 2024.

## **Crop Insurance Considerations**

ARC and PLC are part of a broader USDA safety net that also includes crop insurance and marketing assistance loans.

Producers are reminded that ARC and PLC elections and enrollments can impact eligibility for some crop insurance products.

Producers on farms with a PLC election can purchase Supplemental Coverage Option (SCO) through their Approved Insurance Provider; however, producers on farms where ARC is the election are ineligible for SCO on their planted acres for that crop on that farm.

Unlike SCO, the Enhanced Coverage Option (ECO) is unaffected by an ARC election. Producers may add ECO regardless of the farm program election.

Upland cotton farmers who choose to enroll seed cotton base acres in ARC or PLC are ineligible for the stacked income protection plan (STAX) on their planted cotton acres for that farm.

## **Web-Based Decision Tools**

Many universities offer web-based decision tools to help producers make informed, educated decisions using crop data specific to their respective farming operations. Producers are encouraged to use the tool of their choice to support their ARC and PLC elections.

## **More Information**

For more information on ARC and PLC, producers can visit the [ARC and PLC webpage](#) or contact their local [USDA Service Center](#). Producers can also make elections and complete enrollment [online with level 2 eAuth](#).

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## WCNRD Offers Conservation Cost-Share Program

# Conservation Cost-Share

Are you planning a project that improves water quality and quantity, soil erosion, energy conservation, or wildlife habitat on your property? We have a cost-share program that can help cover 50% of the cost, up to \$7,500.

Call or stop in our office for more information, or download an application at [www.westoncountynrd.org/conservation-cost-share/](http://www.westoncountynrd.org/conservation-cost-share/)

This program covers a variety of projects, and we're always looking for new conservation ideas.

Projects we've covered in the past include wildlife habitat improvement, cover crops, streambank restoration and stabilization, living windbreaks and snow fences, fencing for rotational grazing, irrigation water management, development of water wells and pipelines, and solar water pumps.

**Applications due March 4, 2024**



This cost share provides incentives for landowners within the Weston County Natural Resource District Boundaries to implement natural resource conservation practices improving water quality and quantity, soil erosion, energy conservation or wildlife habitat. This program is also for those landowners who can't typically qualify for federal farm bill programs.

For more information, please visit our website at [westoncountynrd.org/conservation-cost-share/](http://westoncountynrd.org/conservation-cost-share/).

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## Disaster Assistance Available for Livestock Losses through FSA's Livestock Indemnity Program

LIP provides disaster recovery assistance to livestock owners and contract growers who experience livestock deaths, in excess of normal mortality caused by eligible loss conditions including adverse weather, disease and attacks by animals reintroduced into the wild by the federal government or protected by federal law, including wolves and avian predators. LIP also helps livestock owners who must sell livestock at a reduced price because of an injury from certain loss conditions.

For 2023 and subsequent years, an owner or contract grower must file a notice of loss, an application for payment, and supporting documentation within 60 calendar days after the end of the calendar year in which the eligible loss condition occurred. Supporting documentation can include:

- Event documentation,
- Proof of death documentation,

- Proof of normal mortality documentation,
- Livestock beginning inventory documentation,
- For disease losses, FSA county committees can accept veterinarian certifications that livestock deaths were directly related to adverse weather and unpreventable through good animal husbandry and management, and/or
- Copy of grower's contracts (if applicable).

Livestock owners and contract growers should submit their applications and apply for LIP benefits in the physical location county where the loss occurred, but applications can be accepted in any FSA office through Nationwide Customer Service. Loss approval will be dependent on the physical location county where the loss occurred.

For more information, contact the Weston County USDA Service Center at 307-746-2701 extension 2 or visit [fsa.usda.gov](https://fsa.usda.gov).

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## USDA Launches Loan Assistance Tool to Enhance Equity and Customer Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a new online tool to help farmers and ranchers better navigate the farm loan application process. This uniform application process will help to ensure all farm loan applicants receive equal support and have a consistent customer experience with USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA) regardless of their individual circumstances.

USDA experiences a high rate of incomplete or withdrawn applications, particularly among underserved customers, due in part to a challenging and lengthy paper-based application process. The Loan Assistance Tool is available 24/7 and gives customers an online step-by-step guide that supplements the support they receive when working in person with a USDA employee, providing materials that may help an applicant prepare their loan application in one tool.

Farmers can access the Loan Assistance Tool by visiting [farmers.gov/farm-loan-assistance-tool](https://farmers.gov/farm-loan-assistance-tool) and clicking the 'Get Started' button. From here they can follow the prompts to complete the Eligibility Self-Assessment and start the farm loan journey. The tool is built to run on any modern browser like Chrome, Edge, Firefox, or the Safari browser, and is fully functional on mobile devices. It does not work in Internet Explorer.

The Loan Assistance Tool is the first of multiple farm loan process improvements that will be available to USDA customers on farmers.gov in the future. Other improvements and tools that are anticipated to launch in 2023 include:

- A streamlined and simplified direct loan application, reduced from 29 pages to 13 pages.
- An interactive online direct loan application that gives customers a paperless and electronic signature option, along with the ability to attach supporting documents such as tax returns.
- An online direct loan repayment feature that relieves borrowers from the necessity of calling, mailing, or visiting a local Service Center to pay a loan installment.




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## Making Your Land More Resilient to Drought

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service can help you conserve water and build resilience to drought, through conservation practices that improve irrigation efficiency, boost soil health, and manage grazing lands.

## Irrigation Efficiency

USDA helps you improve your irrigation efficiency to ensure each drop of water is used wisely. Saving water on your farm can help during drought and can offset rising water costs; reduce expenditures for energy, chemicals, and labor; and enhance revenues through higher crop yields and improved crop quality. Funded conservation practices include conversion to more efficient irrigation systems, such as micro-irrigation or subsurface drip irrigation, installation of irrigation pipeline, irrigation water management, structures for water control, and flow meters. Tools like drip irrigation, which provides water precisely where and when it's needed, can achieve greater precision with flow meters and soil moisture sensors.

## Soil Health

In addition, soil health conservation practices, such as reduced- or no-till, cover crops, mulching and residue management can help to make your soil, and the plants you grow or animals you raise, healthier. Healthier soil can absorb and retain more water for longer periods of time, making your farm or ranch more resilient to drought. Using soil health practices, you can conserve water by increasing your soil's water-holding capacity and use conservation tillage to keep the ground covered, reducing water loss through transpiration and evaporation.

And soil health practices increase organic matter, and each pound of organic matter can hold up to 20 pounds of water. Every 1% increase in organic matter results in as much as 25,000 gallons of soil water per acre. Each 1% increase in organic matter can also provide up to 30 pounds of more available nitrogen per acre. That means less money and time spent on inputs like water and fertilizer, which make your operation more profitable.

## Rotational/Prescribed Grazing, Water Sources for Livestock

Drought also impacts grazing lands, and NRCS works with you to increase the resilience of your livestock operation. Ranchers can adapt to dry conditions in two main ways: increasing the availability and suitability of forage and ensuring that cattle have an adequate and reliable source of water. For forage, rotational or prescribed grazing (rotating cattle among pastures) can relieve pressure on stressed vegetation and ensure a more consistent supply of forage for animals. NRCS conservationists can also work with you to plant more drought-tolerant forage species, plants best suited to local soils and conditions. For reliable sources of water, NRCS can help you with installing watering facilities, water wells, or water pipeline for livestock. Having available forage and water for livestock can make a big difference in difficult drought conditions.

USDA and NRCS are here for you, helping you recover from drought and prepare for the next one. For more information on drought recovery assistance at [farmers.gov/protection-recovery/drought#recovery](https://farmers.gov/protection-recovery/drought#recovery). For more information on conservation practices to make your operation more resilient to drought in future years, go to [www.nrcs.usda.gov](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

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## Save Time - Make an Appointment with NRCS and FSA Offices

Producers are encouraged to call ahead to schedule an appointment. Appointments ensure maximum use of your time and ensure staff is available to tend to your important business needs. To contact your agency, use the information below.



**Weston County USDA Service Center**

**FSA Office**

1225 Washington Blvd., Ste. 2  
Newcastle, WY 82701

Phone: 307-746-2701 ext. 2  
Fax: 855-415-3437

**Farm Loan Manager:**

Eilish Hanson  
307-696-4459  
[eilish.hanson@usda.gov](mailto:eilish.hanson@usda.gov)

**County Executive Director:**

Sherie Hilgenkamp  
[sherie.hilgenkamp@usds.gov](mailto:sherie.hilgenkamp@usds.gov)

**Program Technicians:**

Jennifer Jones  
[jennifer.jones4@usds.gov](mailto:jennifer.jones4@usds.gov)

Kayla Pederson  
[kayla.pederson@usda.gov](mailto:kayla.pederson@usda.gov)

**FSA County Committee:**

Randy Oleson, Chairman  
John Riesland, Vice Chairman  
Harry Tavegia, Member

**Next County Committee Meeting:**

February 21, 2024 at 1 PM at the Weston County  
USDA Service Center

**NRCS Office**

1225 Washington Blvd., Ste. 3  
Newcastle, WY 82701

Phone: 307-746-3264  
Fax: 866-574-1366

**District Conservationist:**

Paul Eitel  
[paul.eitel@usda.gov](mailto:paul.eitel@usda.gov)

**Acting District Conservationist:**

John "Morgan" Elsom  
[john.elsom@usda.gov](mailto:john.elsom@usda.gov)

**NWTF Co-Operative Forester:**

Austin Sommerville [austin.sommerville@usda.gov](mailto:austin.sommerville@usda.gov)

**WCNRD:**

Caleb Carter, Manager  
[ccarter.wcnrd@gmail.com](mailto:ccarter.wcnrd@gmail.com)

Erin Darlington-Whitcher, Office Administrator  
[westoncountynrd@gmail.com](mailto:westoncountynrd@gmail.com)

**WCNRD Board:**

David Tysdal, Chairman, Rural Supervisor  
Tucker Hamilton, Vice Chairman, Rural Supervisor  
Emily Hartinger, Secretary/Treasurer, Rural Supervisor  
Gene Norman, Urban Supervisor  
Tom Streeter, At-Large Supervisor

**WCNRD Board Meetings** are held 3pm the second  
Tuesday of the month at the Weston County USDA  
Service Center