

# Amid drought, US opens up land for grazing, haying

July 23 2012

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Corn plants struggle to survive in a drought-stricken farm field on July 19 near Oakton, Indiana. The Obama administration opened up protected US land to help farmers and ranchers hit by severe drought, and encouraged crop insurance companies to forgo charging interest for a month.

The Obama administration opened up protected US land to help farmers and ranchers hit by severe drought Monday, and encouraged crop insurance companies to forgo charging interest for a month.

The US [Department of Agriculture](#) said the new measures for major conservation programs were aimed at helping "[livestock producers](#) as the most wide-spread drought in seven decades intensifies in the United States."

"Beginning today, USDA will open opportunities for haying and grazing

on lands enrolled in [conservation programs](#) while providing additional financial and technical assistance to help landowners through this drought," [Agriculture Secretary](#) Tom Vilsack said in a statement.

"President (Barack) Obama and I are committed to getting help to producers as soon as possible and sustaining the success of America's rural communities through these difficult times," he said.

The measures add flexibility to three voluntary programs designed to protect the environment.

Additional acres in the Conservation Reserve Program will be made available to farmers and ranchers for haying or grazing, as the most widespread drought in seven decades has substantially reduced forage for livestock, the USDA said.

The lands made available are classified as "abnormally dry" and do not include sensitive lands such as wetlands and rare habitats.

Other areas opened up were in programs dealing with water conservation and wetlands reserves.

Under the Federal Crop Insurance Program, the USDA said it "will encourage crop [insurance companies](#) to voluntarily forego charging interest on unpaid crop insurance premiums for an extra 30 days, to November 1, 2012, for spring crops."

In turn for the help to struggling farmers and ranchers, the USDA said, it will not require the crop insurance companies to pay uncollected producer premiums until one month later.

It recently reduced the interest rate for emergency loans to 2.25 percent, from 3.75 percent.

Since the year began, [disaster areas](#) have been declared in 29 of the nation's 50 states, making farmers there eligible for low-interest federal loans, the USDA said.

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