

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 15, 2017

Secretary Sonny Perdue
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

Drought conditions are expanding across the Northern Plains at an alarming rate. Thousands of winter wheat acres are currently being harvested for hay, and pastures in many areas are critically short. In addition, the 2017 hay and forage harvested to date in many counties in our state is yielding one-third or less of normal production.

Timely assistance is needed in order to preserve foundation grazing livestock herds in the drought-stricken areas of our state from further downsizing due to lack of feed and forage. The Livestock Forage Program (LFP), authorized under the 2014 Farm Bill, is triggered in a county when it is rated by the U.S. Drought Monitor as having a D3 (extreme drought) intensity in any area of the county at any time during the normal grazing period in an amount equal to three monthly payments. The June 8, 2017, Drought Monitor indicated several counties in our state at the D2 category, and with drought conditions worsening, we expect the D3 category to appear in the very near future. Accordingly, we request that you mobilize applicable county, state, and headquarters staff to be prepared to take LFP applications and issue payments as soon as practicable after the D3 category is realized by any county.

In addition, we request that as counties are triggered for emergency haying and grazing of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres, that you make as many of the 977,555 CRP-enrolled acres in South Dakota available for haying and grazing due to the already realized substantial loss of grazing and forage for feed as soon as reasonably possible.

We are aware that once CRP emergency haying and grazing is triggered, CRP will not normally be available until after August 1, 2017, the end of the primary nesting period in our state. Unfortunately, the forage and pasture losses are already of such great magnitude in our state that additional feed will be desperately needed, as it was during the 2012 drought. Pastures and forage crops will not recover even if rainfall occurs later this summer.

For 2017 only, we strongly urge you to allow the same environmentally sensitive CRP practices to be approved for emergency haying or grazing that were approved by the secretary in 2012 due to drought. And that you pursue any option that would reasonably allow the harvest of forage from all CRP in time to help sustain our grazing livestock industry. We request that CRP acres enrolled in all practices be released no later than July 15, 2017, as this is consistent with the release for haying Wetlands Reserve Program acres in South Dakota.

Should you agree to our request, more than 484,000 additional acres may be available in South Dakota that are enrolled in CRP practices considered more environmentally and wildlife habitat sensitive, and otherwise considered ineligible to be released for emergency haying and grazing.

The grazing livestock producers in our state already suffering depressed prices would benefit greatly if you would timely release the additional CRP contracts for emergency haying and grazing.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



John Thune
U.S. SENATOR



M. Michael Rounds
U.S. SENATOR