

Sustainable FSA: Project Overview

Grounding FSA disaster assistance in reproducible data science

\$13.6B

LFP payments to ranchers since 2008, computed from the project's Farm Payment Files archive

12

public data archives released, with DOIs and reproducible code

1,380+

weekly US Drought Monitor maps mirrored, 2000–present

4

completed M.S. theses on how disaster programs work on the ground

Sustainable FSA is a three-year USDA research partnership led by the Montana Climate Office at the University of Montana, working with the USDA Office of the Chief Economist, the USDA Climate Hubs, and the Farm Service Agency to improve how disaster assistance programs are administered. The project produces authoritative public data archives, reproducible analyses, and field-informed recommendations for FSA county staff and the producers they serve.

The problem

FSA disaster-assistance programs — including the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP), ELAP, and NAP — are a critical lifeline for American producers; LFP alone has paid more than \$13.6 billion since 2008. County-level eligibility hinges on two inputs: the **Normal Grazing Period** for each grazing type in each county, and the weekly **US Drought Monitor** classification.

The foundations beneath both inputs have drifted. County grazing-period dates still largely trace to a one-time 2017 calculation rather than being re-derived with each new climate normal, and piecemeal state and county revisions since have opened stark eligibility discontinuities across county lines. The Drought Monitor classifies drought against baselines that peer-reviewed research shows current conditions have outpaced, and its county determinations rest on a non-authoritative boundary dataset frozen since 2012 and undocumented area thresholds. Criteria drift from the growing seasons and county lines they represent — mismatches FSA county staff see firsthand.

FSA LFP Eligibility
Native Pasture — 2025

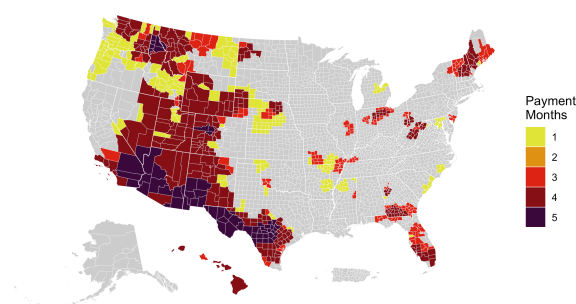


Figure 1. Counties eligible for LFP drought payments on native pasture in 2025, mapped from the project's eligibility archive. Colors show months of eligible payments.

What the project does

Re-grounded the science. Using FSA's own methodology and NOAA climate data, the team rebuilt the county-level Normal Grazing Period calculation as a reproducible workflow anchored to the 1991–2020 normals — re-runnable on each new normal, so criteria stay current with measured conditions.

Closed data gaps. Through Freedom of Information Act requests, the team obtained, cleaned, and publicly archived official Normal Grazing Periods (2008–2026), LFP eligibility determinations, and LFP and FSA county boundary geodatabases — alongside weekly US Drought Monitor mirrors and the disaster designations that unlock emergency assistance.

Listened to FSA staff and producers. Graduate research — including staff interviews conducted with national FSA approval — has produced four M.S. theses on how LFP is delivered on the ground, and where program design and producer experience diverge.

Anticipated future shifts. Using NASA’s downscaled climate projections, the team has characterized how grazing periods are likely to shift; a peer-reviewed manuscript is in preparation.

Why it matters

When the data behind eligibility decisions are transparent, current, and publicly auditable, USDA can avoid misallocations, improve the fiscal integrity of emergency-assistance spending, reduce red tape for county staff, and target relief where it is needed.

Who we are

The Montana Climate Office at the University of Montana is Montana’s official state climate office, operator of the Montana Mesonet weather-station network, and producer of operational drought analyses for the Upper Missouri River Basin and Pacific Northwest. Funded through a cooperative agreement with the USDA Office of the Chief Economist, Office of Energy and Environmental Policy.

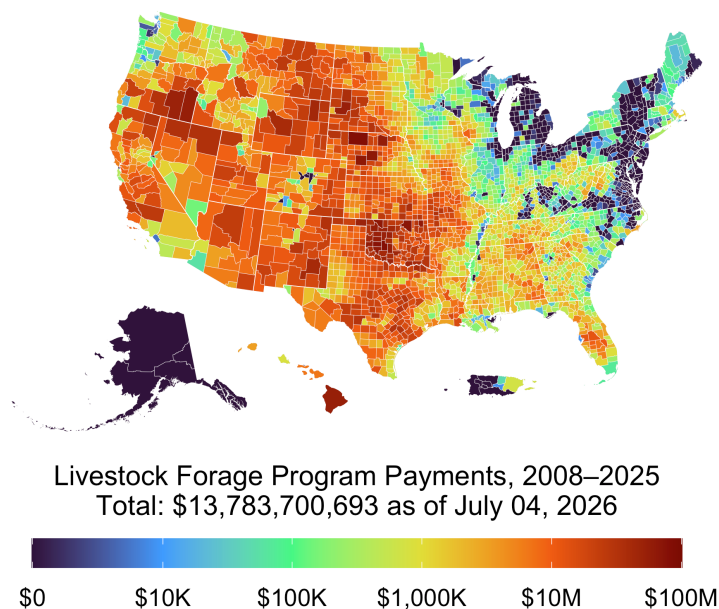


Figure 2. Total Livestock Forage Disaster Program payments by county, 2008–2025 — \$13.8 billion as of July 4, 2026, computed from the project’s Farm Payment Files archive.

LEARN MORE

All data, code, analyses, and archived program documents are freely available on the project website.

sustainable-fsa.com · kyle.bocinsky@umontana.edu



HOW TO CITE

Bocinsky, R. K. (2026). *Sustainable FSA: Project Overview*. Fact sheet. Sustainable FSA project, Montana Climate Office, University of Montana. <https://sustainable-fsa.com>