

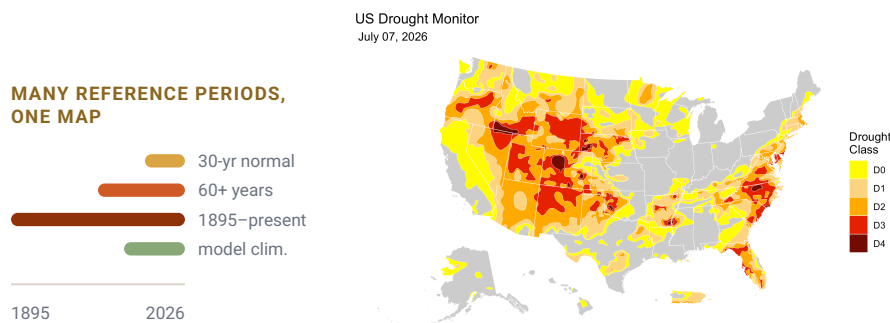
How a Drought Map Becomes a Disaster Payment

The Livestock Forage Disaster Program's eligibility machinery — and where its data foundations have drifted

1

A national drought map is drawn

Each week, US Drought Monitor authors blend dozens of indicators — each measured against a *different* statistical baseline — with recommendations from local experts across the country into a single hand-drawn national assessment.



DRIFTED FOUNDATION

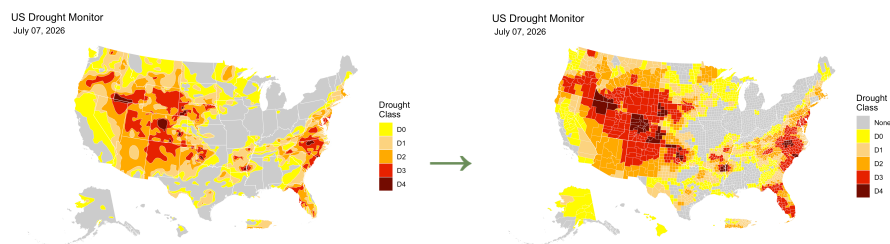
Indicators enter the blend against baselines spanning 30 years to the full 130-year record. The National Academies and peer-reviewed research recommend anchoring classification to the standard, regularly updated 30-year normal, so assessments track the conditions producers manage today.

USDM weekly assessment, July 7, 2026 — continuous drought-class polygons drawn without regard to political boundaries.

2

The map is cut to county lines

The law triggers eligibility when a qualifying drought intensity is rated “in any area of the county” during the normal grazing period (7 U.S.C. § 1531(d)(3)). In practice, the National Drought Mitigation Center — under contract to USDA — snaps the map to county boundaries, and counties appear to be classified only when a percent-of-county threshold is crossed — a stricter standard than the statute prescribes.



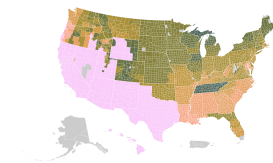
DRIFTED FOUNDATION

The cut uses a non-authoritative county dataset the NDMC adopted c. 2012 and has barely updated since — while the Census, the designated boundary steward under the Geospatial Data Act, has recorded 472 county changes since 2008 — and an undocumented percent-of-county threshold, not the statute's “any area” standard.

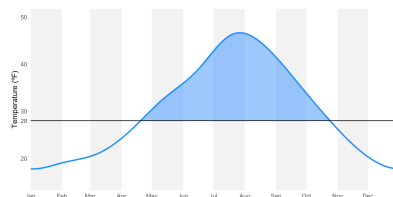
The calendar decides if drought “counts”

Drought only triggers payments if it falls within the county's *Normal Grazing Period* for each grazing type — a temperature-defined season meant to track when forage actually grows.

FSA Normal Grazing Period Duration
Native Pasture — 2026



Official NGP durations, native pasture 2026 — note the discontinuities that follow state lines, not climate.



The NAP-190 definition: the season when normal daily minimums clear 28 °F (Missoula Co., MT).

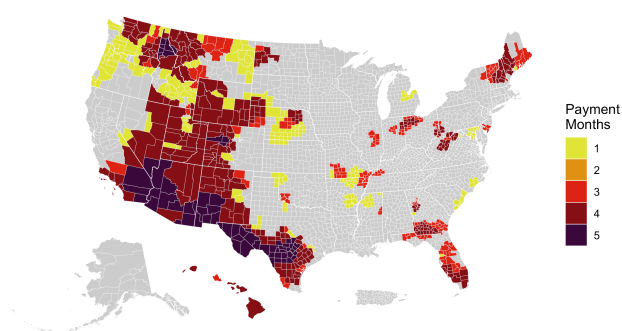
DRIFTED FOUNDATION

Counties started from a one-time 2017 national calculation — but the deeper problem is inconsistent drift since: piecemeal state and county revisions, made without a common method, have produced stark eligibility incongruities across state and county lines.

The result: determinations built on drifted data

Intersect the three layers and every county gets a weekly LFP determination. Each inherited mismatch — mixed baselines, frozen boundaries, inconsistently drifting grazing calendars — propagates into who gets paid, how much, and when. Payments can miss real losses and land where losses are marginal: inefficient for producers, unsustainable for the program.

FSA LFP Eligibility
Native Pasture — 2025



Months of eligible LFP payments, native pasture 2025.

\$13.6B

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

185

counties eligible in 12+ of 17 program years — “disaster” as a recurring expense

472

Census-recorded county boundary changes since 2008; LFP's file is frozen at 2012

2017

vintage of the one-time national calculation Normal Grazing Periods have drifted from

BOTTOM LINE

LFP largely works as designed — but its reference data must adapt as conditions and boundaries change. The fixes are ready and reproducible. Modernization, not elimination.

RE-DERIVE

Recalculate Normal Grazing Periods with a single national method on each new 30-year climate normal, using the project's reproducible NAP-190 pipeline.

RE-ANCHOR

Work with the USDM partnership to classify drought against the standard 30-year normal (NASEM Rec. 8-2).

ALIGN

Adopt authoritative Census county boundaries, document the vintage behind every determination, and classify counties by the statute's “any area of the county” standard.

Data: FOIA-obtained FSA archives and weekly US Drought Monitor mirrors (NDMC · USDA · NOAA). All data, code, and methods: sustainable-fsa.com.