

**ESTIMATING RANGELAND GRAZING LOSS FOR THE NONINSURED CROP DISASTER
ASSISTANCE (NAP) PROGRAM**



Based on outcomes of the virtual workshop:

Estimating rangeland grazing loss for the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance program

June 22, 2021

Hosted and supported by the USDA Southwest and Northern Plains Climate Hubs, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service

INTRODUCTION

In June 2021, the USDA Southwest and Northern Plains Climate Hubs, the U.S. Forest Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) hosted a virtual workshop, *Estimating rangeland grazing loss for the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance program*. “The USDA Farm Service Agency’s (FSA) Noninsured Crop Disaster Program (NAP) provides financial assistance to producers of non-insurable crops when low yields, loss of inventory, or prevented planting occur due to natural disasters” (United States Government, 2021). For crop acreage intended to be grazed, to be eligible for a NAP payment, a producer must have suffered a loss of Animal Unit Days (AUD) in excess of 50% of expected AUD determined on the basis of acreage, carrying capacity, and grazing period. Estimating forage loss from a grazing season is key in estimating the AUD loss. Forage loss is determined using similar mechanically harvested losses, independent assessments of forage conditions, or alternative loss methods approved and determined appropriate by the Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs. Different states manage forage loss assessments differently based on the individual state’s topography, county sizes, and available resources.

Workshop Purpose

Every state experiences challenges in estimating 50% grazing loss on drought-affected rangelands for NAP. This can be a persistent challenge, both for FSA and for loss assessment partners. The goals of this workshop were to:

- Hold space for individual state partners to share about how they make loss assessments and provide the opportunity to learn how each other manage the process.
- Hear about the challenges of accurately measuring 50% grazing loss estimates and possible solutions.
- Demonstrate some online tools for estimating rangeland productivity, to see where these might be of assistance in reaching the 50% loss threshold estimate.
- Discuss whether periodic meetings and other products or activities that might be useful for FSA, for their loss assessor partners, and for tool developers

The virtual workshop provided an opportunity to address the NAP program, hear from FSA state office specialists, and learn about tools for forage production assessment while offering a space for discussion and collaboration. We convened FSA professionals and specialists from across the western states including Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico. Presentations detailed states’ perspectives on gauging the 50% threshold and available tools to aid in forage production assessment. Throughout the workshop, participant interaction was encouraged through engagement activities including chat box questions and discussion sessions. These questions spurred conversation amongst colleagues and highlighted knowledge gaps and challenges in measuring forage production loss.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions were posed to the workshop participants and initiated productive and interactive discussion.

Discussion Question: *What challenges have you faced in assessing the 50% grazing loss threshold for native forage?*

The major challenge mentioned in assessing the 50% loss threshold was an overall lack of good data. There is significant variation across counties in topography, precipitation, and forage growth. Large county sizes covering multiple microclimates and elevation gradients makes accurately assessing loss especially challenging. This variability across counties can cause notable differences in reported losses in neighboring counties. Aside from a data deficit, there is also a lack of resources and assessors to effectively supply assessments across a county. The assessors that are available may not be truly acting independently and can influence the results. The assessments are often late or delayed making it difficult to get payments out in a timely manner. The software available to estimate payments is difficult to use and there is a lot of room for error making it easy to generate over-payments.

Discussion Question: *What solutions or workarounds have worked for you?*

With limited resources and folks on the ground, FSA offices try to connect with as many other resources to help with assessment and fill in the gaps. These outside partners include climate stations, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, ranchers and private irrigation companies. To ensure assessors are working independently from the influence of producers, FSA separates assessors and enforces following the handbook procedure. With large counties proving a challenge, subdividing them in to smaller more regional appropriate sections makes assessment easier and more accurate. By dividing 'like regions', its easier to draw an appropriate average. Tools such as the Rangeland Analysis Platform (RAP) and Fuelcast are helpful in seeing the rates of growth on areas in different years and filling in the gaps in the assessments.

Discussion Question: *What have you learned today from others or from the presentations that might help in assessing the 50% grazing loss threshold?*

Participants agreed learning about available tools and resources to help make more accurate assessments was beneficial. The tools can help reinforce and influence decisions based on assessments especially in large regions where information is not available. If possible, using multiple tools together alongside local information could be very useful. It would be interesting to know how similar or dis-similar the inputs and outputs are of the three different models mentioned and if they are different enough to be independent estimates. Having space for the states to collaborate and learn from one another is invaluable. There is a lot of room for improvement and communication between states to improve and unify procedure.

Discussion Question: *How about looking forward - would having periodic meetings with colleagues across states and agencies be helpful?*

The group concluded that this meeting was productive and having periodic meetings where the states could collaborate and share ideas would be beneficial going forward. These meetings would help to keep the states in the West on the same page and possibly help with policy. National and state staff should be in attendance.

DATA GAPS AND NEXT STEPS

From this conversation, it is evident that the drought-ridden southwestern states could benefit from more collaboration and information sharing. Each state has its own challenges and methods to manage them. With more interstate communication and collaboration, the states could possibly more efficiently estimate production loss. According to the final discussion question, the states would greatly benefit from periodic meetings such as this one with colleagues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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